

cineACTION

The State of the Art **FILM AND FILM CRITICISM TODAY**

**THE DECLINE OF CRITIQUE
FOUND FOOTAGE FILM AND
APOCALYPSE POOH**

HAMMER HORROR FILMS

CESARE ZAVATTINI

**ONCE UPON A TIME
IN AMERICA**

JOAN CHEN

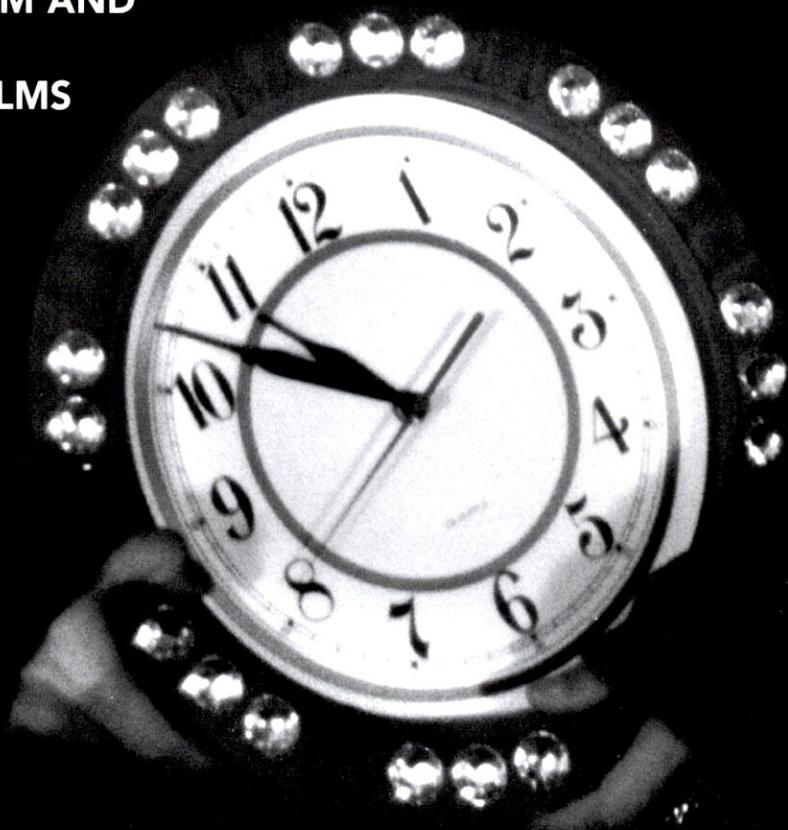
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FRONT COVER: Lee Kang-Sheng in Tsai Ming-Liang's *What Time is it There?*

BACK COVER: *Once Upon a Time in America*



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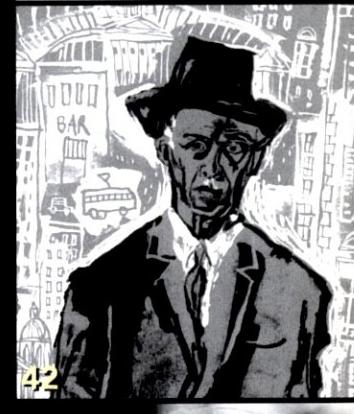
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The State of the Art

FILM AND FILM CRITICISM TODAY

CineAction #72 represents a characteristic cross-section of approaches to and interests in current film studies. We have assembled papers that deal with specific films (*Gigi* and *Once Upon a Time in America*), and a British production company (Hammer Films); two articles on film criticism, one an introspective look at contemporary film criticism and the other, on the "Film Ethics" of Italian film critic/theorist/filmmaker Cesare Zavattini; two interviews, one of a film writer (Charles Mudede) and the other an actor/director (Joan Chen); an analysis of scale and duration in art cinema, and two papers on topics that haven't been addressed before in the pages of *CineAction*: computer-generated interactive pornography and the peculiar intersection of avant-garde film with popular culture experienced and disseminated via the Internet. Hopefully, there will be something for everyone in the pages of this issue.

—Susan Morrison, editor

TO OUR READERS

The last year and a half has been a difficult time for the *CineAction* collective as we encountered some unexpected issues regarding our funding. One major result for us has been an inconsistency in our publishing timelines.

However, we are happy to be able to report that we have done everything necessary to rectify this turn of events, and as a result, our financial situation is now secure. We will make every effort to ensure that *CineAction* appears on a regular schedule, and by the end of 2008, we hope to be caught up and on schedule for the following publishing year.

We apologize for any inconvenience that our erratic schedule may have caused you. We greatly value your on-going support and commitment, and thank you for your understanding.

We look forward to a long and productive future,

—The editorial collective

CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

ISSUE # 73

Edited by Scott Forsyth

CINEMA AND NEW MEDIA

New media, and a proliferation of new media commodities and technologies, have been transforming the mediascape, nationally and globally, in recent decades. This issue welcomes discussions and explorations of the impact—aesthetic, ideological, political, economic—of these developments on the evolution, and mutation, of what we still call cinema.

CANADIAN FILMS

Essays of developments in Canadian filmmaking; critical analysis of recent Canadian films of any genre.

Submissions in hard copy by **January 2, 2008** to Scott Forsyth, Department of Film, Centre for Film and Theatre, York University, Toronto, ON M3J 1P3. Questions to sforsyth@yorku.ca

ISSUE # 74

THE ART-HOUSE FILM: Then and Now

We are looking for submissions on the legacy of the 60s art film which had its origins in Europe during the post war era. Articles may include films from the 50s to the present.

Edited by Florence Jacobowitz fjacob@yorku.ca

and Richard Lippe rlippe@yorku.ca

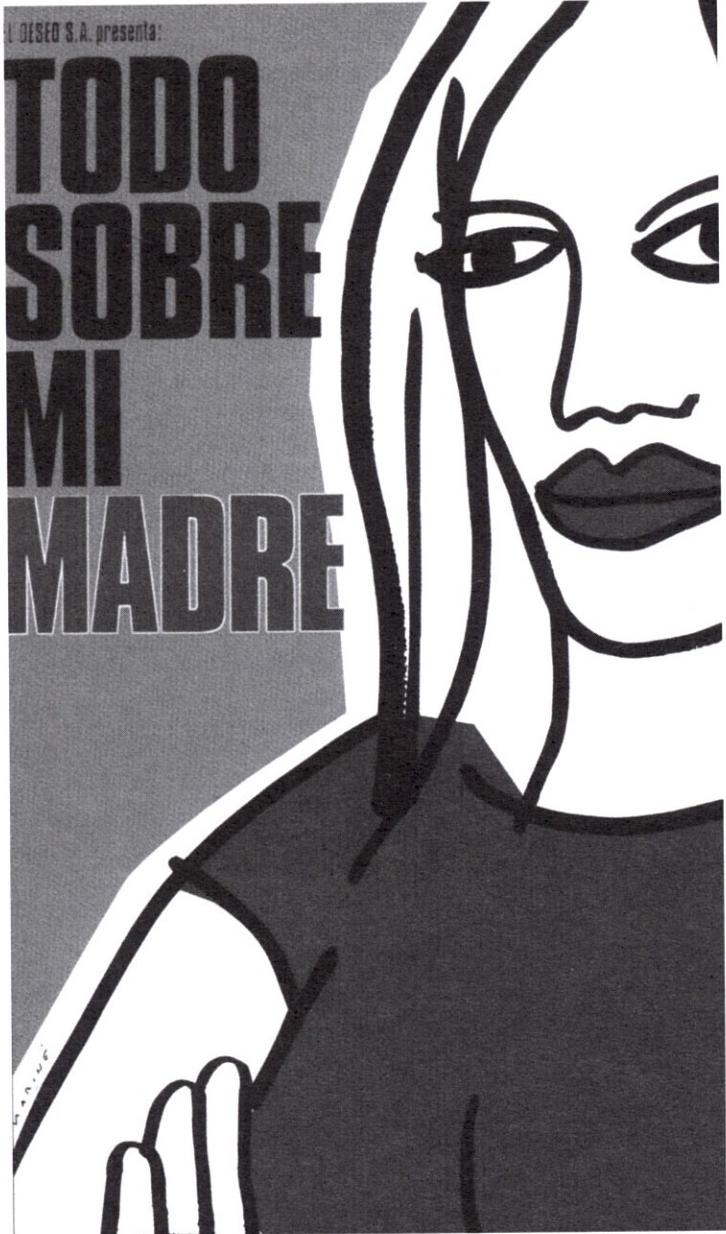
Please email any questions or interest to the editor. Submissions in hard copy mailed to the editor at 40 Alexander Street, #705, Toronto Ontario, Canada M4Y 1B5

The New Film Studies and the Decline of Critique

RICHARD RUSHTON

In his elegy for modernism, *Farewell to an Idea*, the art historian T.J. Clark registers his undying opposition to capitalism, a capitalism which, he argues, has today more than ever entered into the minutiae of everyday life as a determining factor. Amid his general dismay at the negative consequences the victory of capital has wrought upon the world, he intones that, for him, "at least capitalism remains my Satan."¹ Even in the face of the impossibility of any victory over capitalism, and from the even more impossible position of merely being a scholar in the humanities, at least Clark is prepared to declare that he will resist capitalism with all his might. Perhaps it is possible for an art historian to declare such things, for art history has a long and distinguished list of critics inspired by Marx, from Meyer Shapiro to Harold Rosenberg and beyond (a list on which T. J. Clark can certainly be counted). Film studies, however, has no such distinguished list. On the contrary, a list of film writers or critics indebted to Marx reads more like a list of the damned; names like Adorno and Horkheimer, Jean-Louis Comolli, Colin MacCabe, Stephen Heath, and Jean-Louis Baudry are today ones that current trends in film studies define themselves against (perhaps Walter Benjamin is the only Marxist figure with whom contemporary scholars are sympathetic). From declarations that film studies have entered a post-theory age to numerous attempts to reinvent film studies,² the Marxist critique of cinema as an "industry" or "apparatus"—those positions which formed the bedrock of the Marxist critique of cinema—appears to contain interest for scholars only insofar as it can be dismantled and debunked.

Why might this be the case? In 2000 Dudley Andrew charted a small history of cinema studies as an academic endeavor.³ He argued that cinema studies emerged in a university context in the years surrounding 1968 as a result of the researches of passionate amateurs; no-one working in those early years of cinema studies could claim to have been trained as a film scholar. Nowadays, however, the field is thoroughly institutionalized and much of Andrew's discussion concerns the way that cinema studies had to evolve and adapt to institutional pressures. He emphasizes that much of the expansion and diversification of the field was probably the result of institutional pressures—those of catering to customer (i.e., student) demands and university budgets, the U.S. tenure-track system (mirrored to an extent in the U.K. by the dreaded Research Assessment Exercise) and the agendas and





Pedro Almodóvar's *All About My Mother*, 1999

schedules of publishers. Less important, he suggests, have been genuinely intellectual reasons for such advancements. He writes that "If the cinema studies edifice of semiotics, Marxism, and psychoanalysis was abandoned while its mortar was still wet, one can certainly blame the weight of ideas it was asked to bear or the flimsy trusses upholding them, but [one might] look first to a university system that encourages scholars to expand into new subdivisions rather than repair, fortify, or remodel the field's city center."⁴ Those approaches of the earlier age—the approaches which blended structuralist semiotics with psychoanalysis and Marxism—might certainly have been overturned for intellectual reasons but, for Andrew, a far more likely reason for its demise was "because its logic was at odds with the university system."⁵

It is almost unique to read of a film scholar's nostalgia for what today seem like the bad old days of psycho-Marxism in cinema studies, for the academic masters of the current generation define themselves by their opposition to that earlier age. A range of discourses have today superseded the earlier ones: we are in an age of post-theory, one in which questions of film history are paramount, alongside those of reception, exhibition, comprehension, and film style.⁶ If I read Andrew's piece correctly, he is trying to begin to point to what has been lost for the current age of cinema studies, for he argues that the earlier age "seemed to offer a vanguard alternative pedagogy" that made it the *enfant*

terrible on the university block.⁷ Cinema studies today can hardly claim to be a vanguard endeavor. I am tempted—and it is a temptation I will follow throughout this article—to go further than Andrew: cinema studies in the late 1960s and 1970s was not just offering an alternative to traditional university contexts and disciplines, it was also deeply engaged with trying to determine the stakes of an alternative cinema and, by extension, was also trying to imagine the possibility of an alternative order of things, a different society, an alternative way of life that could be fostered by or made possible by the cinematic alternatives those critics invoked.

It is this latter alternative that I want to stress: today's cinema studies agenda is one that *cannot imagine a different kind of society*, and nor can it imagine a *different kind of political structure*. Instead, it can only propose modifications of existing practices, minor changes, subtle re-inflections, or indeed, propose no changes at all. If film studies as an academic discipline was founded on the critique of "cinema as industry" or "cinema as apparatus"—that is, founded on the degree to which it could imagine a different kind of cinema which might lie at the basis of a different kind of society—then the dismissal and transcendence of this critique amounts to nothing less than an *affirmation* of the commerce of cinema as an industry and apparatus. If the centerpiece of the earlier age of film theory was that it derided the commer-

cialism of the commercial art of cinema, then the central position of today's approaches to film studies is one that can do nothing less than celebrate the unbridled commercialism of cinema. If film studies burst onto the scene in the late 1960s espousing a thorough-going critique of capitalism, then today's scholars represent a reversal of that position—today's film scholars can merely consent to capitalism.

Why does the discipline of film studies find itself in a position which seems to be completely severed from the aims and aspirations of that earlier period? Part of me seeks the answer in films themselves, for the late 1960s and 1970s abound in fine examples of cinematic experimentation and brilliance (though, of course, there were many films that were neither experimental or brilliant), and I cannot help thinking that the criticism of the time went hand-in-hand with the kinds of films that were emerging. Today, certainly, there are still great films being made, but the urgency with which film studies now celebrates the popularity of its most financially successful creations strikes me as being utterly at odds with the passionate enthusiasm for the alternative forms of cinema out of which much of the motivation for the study of film as an academic discipline emerged. One need only examine the avalanche of books on the contemporary Hollywood blockbuster to see how the stakes of the discipline have changed so dramatically.⁸ Perhaps another way of putting it is to say that, today, film studies are less interested in fostering the kinds of filmmaking that are challenging and difficult, and are more devoted to charting the stakes of cinema's popularity and broader cultural significance (for example, as expressions of the popular imagination, or as expressions of national predilections or specific historical trends).⁹ In short, the kinds of questions which gave rise to the study of films, such as "What makes a film good or great or worth studying?" have been replaced with what seems to me to be one overarching question: "What makes a film popular?"

I am not in any way advocating a return to the kinds of analysis championed by the apparatus and screen theories of the 1960s and 1970s; there is little question that such writings do belong to a different age of film studies. What I do want to rescue from that moment is a certain *spirit* with which such research was engaged, which is probably something like a determined fight for better films, a commitment to more delicate and committed engagements with cinema and, perhaps more than anything else, the search for a conceptualization of the role that a better cinema might play in the construction of a better society. To a certain extent, the loss of such a spirit is a result of the professionalization of film studies: researchers today are supposed to be somewhat dispassionate about their subject, are supposed to treat all films with due respect and interest so that films themselves may be given a chance to speak by virtue of their own contexts, histories and audiences. Film scholars, if they are to be taken seriously today, can no longer regard themselves as amateurs who invest themselves with a passion for films which might restrict their methods, skew their tastes and distort their research findings.

The rise of more professional modes of cinema study has led to a very substantial widening of the field, and few would doubt this is a good thing: our knowledge and understanding of cinema is now much more open, generous, thorough, and "correct" (in the broadest sense). But these gains have come at the

expense of the substantial critical engagement with the capacities of films and the formal or structural elaboration of their social and political effects that founded academic film studies.¹⁰ Am I trying to imply that film studies are no longer concerned with the social and political effects of films? Certainly not, and I would agree that what David Bordwell and others have identified as a continuation of the classic modes of film theory, from its "subject position" phase identified with the 1960s, 1970s and into the 1980s, to its "cultural studies" phase—beginning in the 1980s and continuing to this day—most certainly is evidence that the analysis of cinema's social and political effects has continued, and that it has continued in a mode that is more open, generous and inclusive; if the theories of the 1960s and 1970s were heavily biased towards all-encompassing notions of ideological interpolation, then, if nothing else, recent approaches have taken account of significant subjective nuances that were flattened out by the earlier critiques.¹¹ But this gain has been won at the cost of a substantial loss: the inspiration which lies at the heart of the earlier critiques is that of the possibility of imagining a different kind of society and a different kind of world in ways that seem quite alien to the new age of film studies.

What do I hope to gain, prove or demonstrate? I hope to convincingly argue that there is a place in film studies for defining and defending *important* films. What I mean by important films probably does imply something like a canon of great films, of films that are important because they are great films. As such, important films are ones that require defense on the grounds of taste: a great film is important because it is a great film, not because it is popular, not because it presented the first application of a new technology, and not because it responded to a particular historical moment—though, of course, a great film might include any or all of these elements as a measure of its greatness. My sentiments here echo those of Stanley Cavell, a figure who still seems to be something of an outsider for mainstream film studies. He has often tried to define what it means to call a film great, and has recently stated that "I think this is what I mean in calling a work great, not having to do with the size of its fame but with something like the permanence or inexhaustibility of its interest."¹² Finding important films might thus be said to be a task of finding films with lasting interest. No film is in-and-of-itself great, for it is only by way of argument, defense, and discussion that a work might ever approach greatness. It seems to me that what film studies now avoid in their quest for dispassionate modes of research are precisely those things that define the greatness of films themselves. Perhaps that is all I ultimately want to say: film studies have stopped arguing about which films might be considered great.

But what does the greatness of films have to do with Marxism or capitalism? Isn't the kind of "tastemaking" I'm here espousing directly opposed to the fairer, equalizing, anti-elitist trend that is central to the way that films are now studied in the academy? Am I not resurrecting a form of elitism and distinction (in Bourdieu's sense)¹³ that counteracts all the gains that have been made in film studies in the name of equality, especially in regard to the advocacy of popular cinema-going (founding works like Richard Dyer's *Only Entertainment* and Thomas Schatz's *Hollywood Genres* come to mind).¹⁴ Is not my argument thus directly antithetical to Marxist conceptions of class struggle; am I not merely shoring up the privileges of the class of tastemakers

against the popular rabble? I will plead "No!" to all of the above, for, in the first instance, the drawing up of canons does not in any way preclude popular works—Cavell is again exemplary here: his championing of great films has most often been a championing of popular, Hollywood fare.¹⁵ In the second instance, what I would like to think is important is not to establish *which* works are great, but, on the contrary, to inspire film scholars to *argue* over which works are great. It is not the fact of the greatness of any particular film that I am here trying to declare, but rather the fact that no film scholars seem to be much interested any more in arguing about what might make a film great, they are not prepared to debate what the stakes of greatness are, they are not prepared to defend and argue for films on the basis that films can be great, and indeed, in many instances, are great.

What, then, has happened to film studies? One domain of research that has been on the rise for a number of years now is that of *audience research* or *reception studies*. This field defines itself in opposition to "spectator" and "apparatus" theories, which is to say that audience research defines itself in opposition to the Marx-inspired arguments of the 1970s, among others.¹⁶ Instead of trying to determine what in a particular film might be significant (as determined by the film "text"), audience research tends to search for the social, cultural, industrial, historical or economic factors "around" a film which might be said to determine its significance. As one recent (admittedly excellent) study puts it, audience research asks "How does a text mean? For whom? In what circumstances?"¹⁷ These approaches study films less as works of art and more as products of an industrial process that are made for and consumed by audiences. A major motivation for the audience research paradigm centers on the quest for defining the tastes and preferences of *actual* audiences as distinct from the kinds of hypothetical or implied spectators of the earlier age of film studies, for the latter variety of viewers were ones restricted, by and large, to the mind's eye of the film critic. The audience research paradigm thus turns away from the judgments of scholars and critics and instead focuses attention on the judgments and statements of *actual* audiences.

Martin Barker, one scholar at the forefront of audience research in the United Kingdom, is critical of scholars and other researchers for not testing their claims when judging and analysing films. He argues that "Very few [film scholars] have been willing to take the step and look for evidence, let alone conduct research, to find out the truth or otherwise of their claims."¹⁸ By conducting interviews with actual audiences and by getting them to fill in questionnaires, and so on, Barker feels he is taking the much needed step towards uncovering the truth about what spectators or audiences think and do when they go to the cinema. And there is no reason to think that his results are not valid, but to my mind, Barker is very much confused about precisely what kinds of results *are* valid. Audience research is most certainly useful for charting historical trends, for cataloguing the dreams and aspirations of filmgoers, and for describing and detailing the kinds of social activities that surround film consumption. But I think it is overstating the case to believe that audience research can do much more than this (and nor does it have to): it can tell us a great deal about what audiences of films

have the capacity to do when they view films, but it cannot tell us much about what *films themselves* have the capacity to do. The latter kind of investigation fits into an entirely different category of research which has a different set of aims and a different set of criteria for what counts as valid.

What do films have the capacity to do?—I think this is the question film criticism asks. (This is a very different question from the one audience research asks: *what do audiences do with films?*) Film criticism eschews actual audiences—and rightly so, for film criticism is concerned with *potential* or *hypothetical* audiences. Unlike audience research, film criticism is not concerned with what audiences might *already* think about films, but is instead interested in what audiences might *not* have thought about films. Thus, film criticism is less concerned with what audiences might *actually* have gotten from a film and is more concerned with what audiences might potentially or hypothetically get from a film. In some ways, film criticism is something of a challenge to the cinema-goer, the challenge to get *more* from a film, the challenge to think that a film is *doing more* than you might have thought it was. To my mind, the best examples of film criticism are ones that encourage audiences to view differently; they encourage viewers to encounter aspects of a film that might have passed them by, or which might have been unclear or unrecognizable on a first viewing, or which might have been misunderstood. In short, film criticism pushes a viewer to view a film differently from the way in which it might have ordinarily or predictably been viewed.

Film criticism, at its best, is a matter of knowledge. However, it is not a form of knowledge that can be empirically proven, and it is thus a mode of knowledge that differs markedly from the kinds of knowledge expected by audience researchers. Barker has claimed that the kinds of knowledge sought by audience researchers call upon the criteria of "adequacy to the world";¹⁹ the question audience researchers ask of their material is therefore something like: Does my claim about such and such a film fit with what other people have claimed about the film? For Barker, the only criteria that can be said to count are ones that are empirically tested.

But the kind of knowledge applicable to film criticism—or to criticism more generally—is not that of "adequacy to the world"; the test of film criticism is not one of discovering whether people agree with one's claims or not. Rather, film criticism is a matter of opening the world up to the *possibility* of agreeing with one's claims. And this is a model of *potential* knowing: the risk the film critic takes is that of testing his or her propositions about a film, of trying to test what kinds of propositions about films and ways of understanding the world *might be* shared with others, might be agreed upon by others as propositions that will count as knowledge.

These statements must sound somewhat abstruse, so I think an example is probably in order. Pedro Almodóvar's films have always interested me and for nearly twenty years now the prospect of a new Almodóvar film has always been a cause for excitement. But I have to admit that I've never been quite sure what to make of them—there has always been something a little wishy-washy about them, something about them that I was unable to work out or put into place. All of this recently changed, however, and it has changed because of a work of film criticism. In one chapter of their extraordinary book, *Forms of Being*, Leo

Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit discuss Almodóvar's films with particular emphasis on *All About My Mother* (1999).²⁰ In admittedly rather difficult theoretical terms, Bersani and Dutoit argue that Almodóvar's films, culminating with *All About My Mother*, are about trying to discover new forms of social relation. For a long time, they argue, Almodóvar's films had been about mapping the inadequacies of older forms of social relation based on traditional notions of the family where the father was indelibly the upholder of the law, a law which, borrowing both from psychoanalysis and the title of one of Almodóvar's films, they call the "Law of Desire." This law changes, however, with *All About My Mother*, for a different mode of law and a different form of being is envisaged which no longer has its foundations in the dictates of the father. What is instituted instead is a form of law that is "all about the mother."

Bersani and Dutoit's analysis achieved what is, for me, the highest aim of film criticism: to encourage viewers to view differently. Quite simply, Bersani and Dutoit's chapter on Almodóvar's films has completely changed my understanding of those films—I now view Almodóvar's films *differently*. This difference has little or nothing to do with whether Bersani and Dutoit's reading of Almodóvar is "correct" or whether it is "adequate to the world." Indeed, I'd speculate that very few people would have emerged from the cinema having seen *All About My Mother* and declared that "I particularly enjoyed the way the film tried to invoke a new way of organizing social relations." But the function of film criticism is not that of instantly garnering popular consent; in fact, its aims are probably quite the contrary: those of challenging instantaneous and popular consensual points-of-view. Surely one of the reasons anyone engages in film criticism is to bring to light something about a film which has *not* been noticed or explained before, and the challenge is then to hope that others might at the very least understand what this critic has discovered about a film, and at the very most that this critic will enable that film to be seen in a new and different way. This, I would argue, is precisely what happens in Bersani and Dutoit's account of *All About My Mother*: they allow the film to be viewed in an entirely new and different way.

By way of contrast with Bersani and Dutoit's example of film criticism, it is worth concentrating on one of the more ambitious examples of audience research, and I look here again to the work of Martin Barker, in this instance a book co-written with Kate Brooks called *Knowing Audiences*.²¹ Barker and Brooks's project involved lengthy and wide-ranging question and answer sessions with a large number of cinema-goers both prior and subsequent to their viewings of the film, *Judge Dredd*, upon its initial release in 1995. The book that resulted presented an extraordinarily detailed analysis of their findings. Although the book aims to present a number of problems on the nature of film studies, as well as offering some answers to those problems, I think one of Barker and Brooks' key questions arises half-way through the book, and it is a question that goes to the heart of what motivates audience research. The authors take some inspiration from a book on art history which offers a detailed discussion of the concrete dilemmas that faced painters in Renaissance Italy, questions such as "How much will such and such a paint cost me?" or "How might I paint this theme in a way that flatters my patron?"²² Barker and Brooks surmise that one of the outcomes of that book was that the practice of painting could be consid-

ered less a matter of artistic creation and more a matter of finding solutions to practical, concrete problems, problems defined not by "art" as such, but problems that arose from social and cultural pressures. Having considered the way such problems were negotiated in Renaissance Italy, Barker and Brooks then make the following claim: for artistic works, including films, "It is not the medium which determines the manner of response, but the place of that medium within a social and cultural circuit, and the tasks given to that medium in the life of the society."²³

For these researchers, then, the social and cultural determinations of the art object (or cultural object) take precedence over anything intrinsic to the object itself. What is important in an artwork is the way it responds to its contextual environment; no artwork might be said to transcend such determinations. Is it going too far for me to say that such a position considers artworks as wholly *reducible* to their cultural and social determinations and thus contends that they are unable in any way to transcend those determinations? I do believe this is what Barker and Brooks intend to argue, and to me it sounds like an edict which immediately cuts short the possibilities of any medium, for if media are reducible to their socio-cultural determinations then such works are entirely reducible to what is imaginable in the society that produces them. From such a perspective the artworks of any medium are unable to invoke something akin to *another world*, to bring forth the opportunity of a different society or another way of being.²⁴

If there is something akin to socio-cultural determinism at work here, then what forms does it assume? For instance, do Barker and Brooks provide criteria of "success" for the film under discussion? Indeed they do, and their criteria are none other than ones that seem posed entirely in terms of the market: what kinds of financial risks are taken by filmmakers that underpin the need for "success"—a success determined in financial terms—and what marketing strategies should be employed by filmmakers to ensure they reach the widest possible market for their film-product; how do filmmakers and promoters "work ... to create a shared vocabulary with their audience" is the way Barker and Brooks phrase it?²⁵ The authors even go so far as to unashamedly conceive of the relation between a "work of art" and its "audience" as a "transaction," an analogy that is followed through in subsequent chapters by pointing to the "investments" cinema-goers make in watching films and the "bargains" they may or may not strike with the films they see. Ultimately, then, if Barker and Brooks conceive of their project as one that inquires into the social and cultural determinants of cinema-going, then such socio-cultural determinants turn out to be wholly economic, matters of financial "success" made on the basis of consumer "investments" and "bargains" struck between a promoter's promises and the end user's satisfactions. To my mind, *Knowing Audiences* is a prime example of the way that recent film studies have consented to capitalism (indeed, the authors' celebrations of capitalism seem to me entirely intended).

Supporters of the audience research paradigm will no doubt claim that I have simplified the issues and that I have chosen selectively in focussing on Barker and Brook's example of *Knowing Audiences*. But I think their book is something of a high water mark in film studies' adoption of the cultural studies turn away from producers and towards consumers. That turn has focussed on denying the greatness or the possibility of greatness

of works of art or popular media in favour of the determinations of the market. From such a perspective, popular culture has no determinant other than that of its own popularity, on the degrees of success with which such products are consumed.

It is high time for film critics to fight back and resist the temptation to assess films in terms of their market reach, audience "investments" and "transactions," or consumer "bargaining power." Critics should also believe that there are filmmakers who actively resist the determinations of the market and who are motivated by the prospect of making potentially great films. Such greatness does not preclude the captations of capitalism and the market—a great film might easily be one with a massive budget, a smothering marketing campaign and jaw-dropping box office receipts. But such matters of the market should in no way be ones that guide a film scholar's approach to the greatness of any film. Rather, the greatness of any film should be a matter of argument, debate, and discussion. That, to me, is the most pressing task facing film studies as a discipline today.

Do I hope for as much as Marx's famous thesis XI ("The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to *change it*")? Yes and no, for the task of film criticism is to *interpret* films, but I would like to think that it is only by interpreting films that film critics might then offer ways in which the world might be changed. And isn't this the difference between the audience research approach and that taken by scholars such as Bersani and Dutoit? Audience research can only state "This is how the world *is*" whereas works of film criticism can aspire to demonstrating something like: "This is the way the world *could be*."

Aleksandr Sokurov has recently claimed that "Art creates a different world. You have to make a film in such a way that it might overcome its own condition, its frame and become another film—another life."²⁶ Sokurov's statement can be taken as something of a rule for film critics: the invitation to discover in a film not just the socio-cultural determinations of the here-and-now or the ways that *actual* lives and audiences have used or reacted to a film, but instead to discover in a film what is made possible or imaginable as an alternative way of life, another world, a different order of things.

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Notes

- 1 T.J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999, p. 8.
- 2 For example, David Bordwell and Noël Carroll (eds.), *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, Madison, WI.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995; Martin Barker with Thomas Austin, *From Antz to Titanic: Reinventing Film Analysis*, London: Pluto Press, 2000; Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (eds.), *Reinventing Film Studies*. London: Arnold, 2000.
- 3 Dudley Andrew, "The 'Three Ages' of Cinema Studies and the Age to Come," *Proceedings of the Modern Language Association*, 115 (3), 2000, pp. 341-351.
- 4 Andrew, p. 344.
- 5 Andrew, p. 346.
- 6 See, for example, the comprehensive histories of early cinema published by the University of California Press (Richard Abel, *The Red Rooster Scare: Making Cinema American, 1900-1910*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1999; Lee Grieveson, *Policing Cinema: Movies and Censorship in Early-Twentieth-Century America*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2004), the impressive reception history studies by the likes of Janet Staiger (*Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992 and *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception*, New York: New York University Press, 2000) and Eric Smoodin (*Regarding Frank Capra: Audience, Celebrity and American Film Studies, 1930-1960*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004); on comprehension and style, David Bordwell's major efforts (*Narration in the Fiction Film*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985; *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema*, Cambridge, MA. and London: Harvard University Press, 1989; *On the History of Film Style*, Cambridge, MA. and London: Harvard University Press, 1997).
- 7 Andrew, p. 345.
- 8 Among the many are Geoff King, *Spectacular Narratives: Hollywood in the Age of the Blockbuster*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2000; Julian Stringer (ed.), *Movie Blockbusters*, London: Routledge, 2003; Warren Buckland, *Directed by Steven Spielberg: Poetics of the Contemporary Hollywood Blockbuster*, New York: Continuum, 2006.
- 9 In works, for example, on national cinemas (such as Susan Hayward's *French National Cinema*, London: Routledge, 1993) or those influenced by cultural studies approaches (for example, Anne Friedberg's *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford: University of California Press, 1993).
- 10 Raymond Bellour's writings in the late 1960s and 1970s are exemplary here; Raymond Bellour, *The Analysis of Films*, Constance Penley (ed.), Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000.
- 11 Bordwell, "Contemporary Film Studies and the Vicissitudes of Grand Theory," in Bordwell and Carroll (eds.) *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, Madison, WI.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995, pp. 3-36. Cf. Richard Allen and Murray Smith, "Introduction: Film Theory and Philosophy," in Allen and Smith (eds.), *Film Theory and Philosophy*, Clarendon: Oxford University Press, 1997, pp. 1-35.
- 12 Stanley Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life*, Cambridge, MA., London: Harvard University Press, p. 249.
- 13 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, translated by Richard Nice, London: Routledge, 1984.
- 14 Richard Dyer, *Only Entertainment*, London: Routledge, 1992; Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System*, New York: McGraw Hill, 1981.
- 15 Stanley Cavell *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*, Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1981, and *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996.
- 16 For example, in Jackie Stacey's foundational reception study, *Star Gazing*, the analysis of actual audience responses is contrasted with the work done by film scholars in the 1970s and 1980s that was primarily inspired by psychoanalysis (*Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship*. London and New York. Routledge, 1994); Martin Barker defines much of his work in opposition to what he derides as the "bureaucratic 'Marxism'" (whatever that means) of the 1970s; "*The Lord of the Rings* and 'Identification,'" *European Journal of Communication* 20 (3), 2005, p. 354.
- 17 Janet Staiger, *Media Reception Studies*, New York: New York University Press, 2005, p. 2.
- 18 Barker, *From Antz to Titanic*, p. 7.
- 19 Martin Barker, "Assessing the 'Quality' in Qualitative Research: The Case of Text-Audience Relations," *European Journal of Communication* 18 (3), 2003, p. 318.
- 20 Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, "Almodóvar's Girls (*All About My Mother*)," *Forms of Being: Cinema, Aesthetics, Subjectivity*, London: BFI, 2004, pp. 74-123.
- 21 Martin Barker and Kate Brooks, *Knowing Audiences: Judge Dredd, its Friends, Fans and Foes*, Luton: University of Luton Press, 1998.
- 22 Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.
- 23 Barker and Brooks, p. 136.
- 24 As an example that is both well-known and contentious: if *Oedipus Rex* were solely reducible to its socio-cultural horizon, then no Oedipus complex could have been invented by Freud. See Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, "Oedipus without the Complex," *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece* (Trans. Janet Lloyd), New York: Zone Books, 1990, pp. 85-112.
- 25 Barker and Brooks, p. 136.
- 26 "Interview with Aleksandr Sokurov," conducted and translated by Jeremi Szaniawski, *Critical Inquiry*, Autumn 2006, pp 18-19.

The Horror, Piglet, The Horror

FOUND FOOTAGE, MASH-UPS, AMVs, THE AVANT-GARDE,
AND THE STRANGE CASE OF *APOCALYPSE POOH*

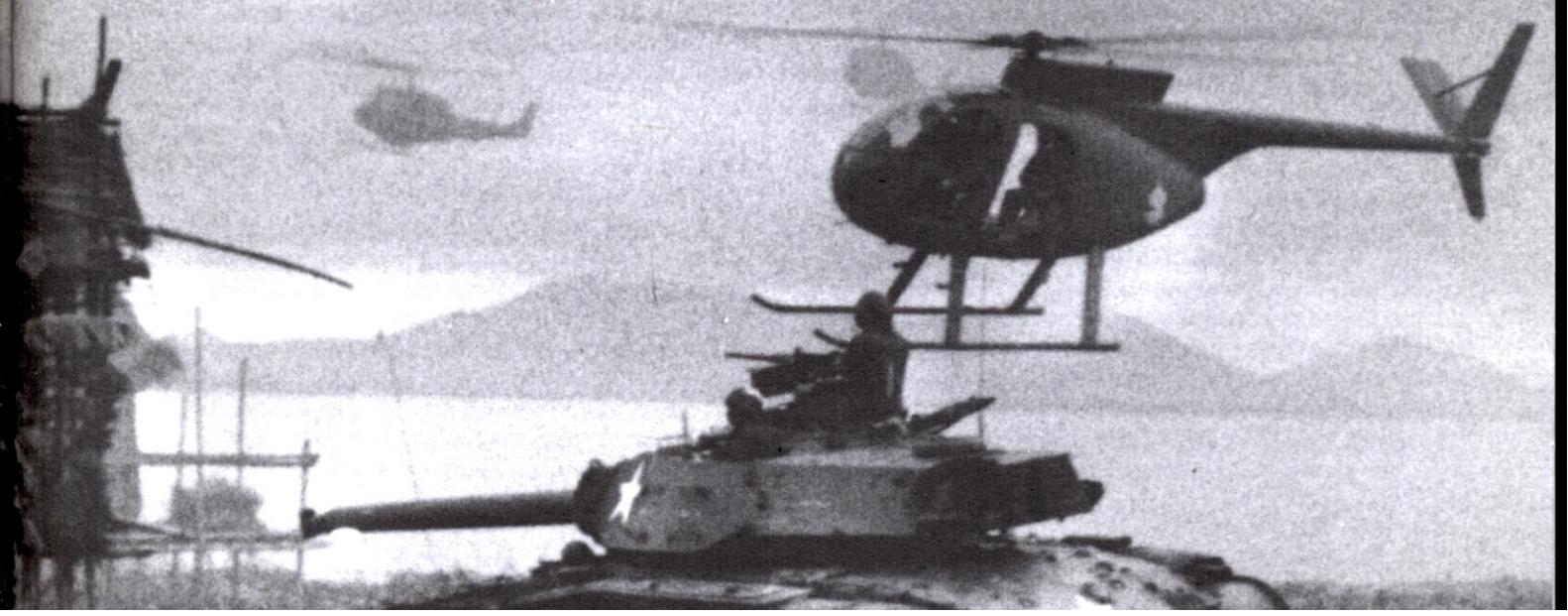
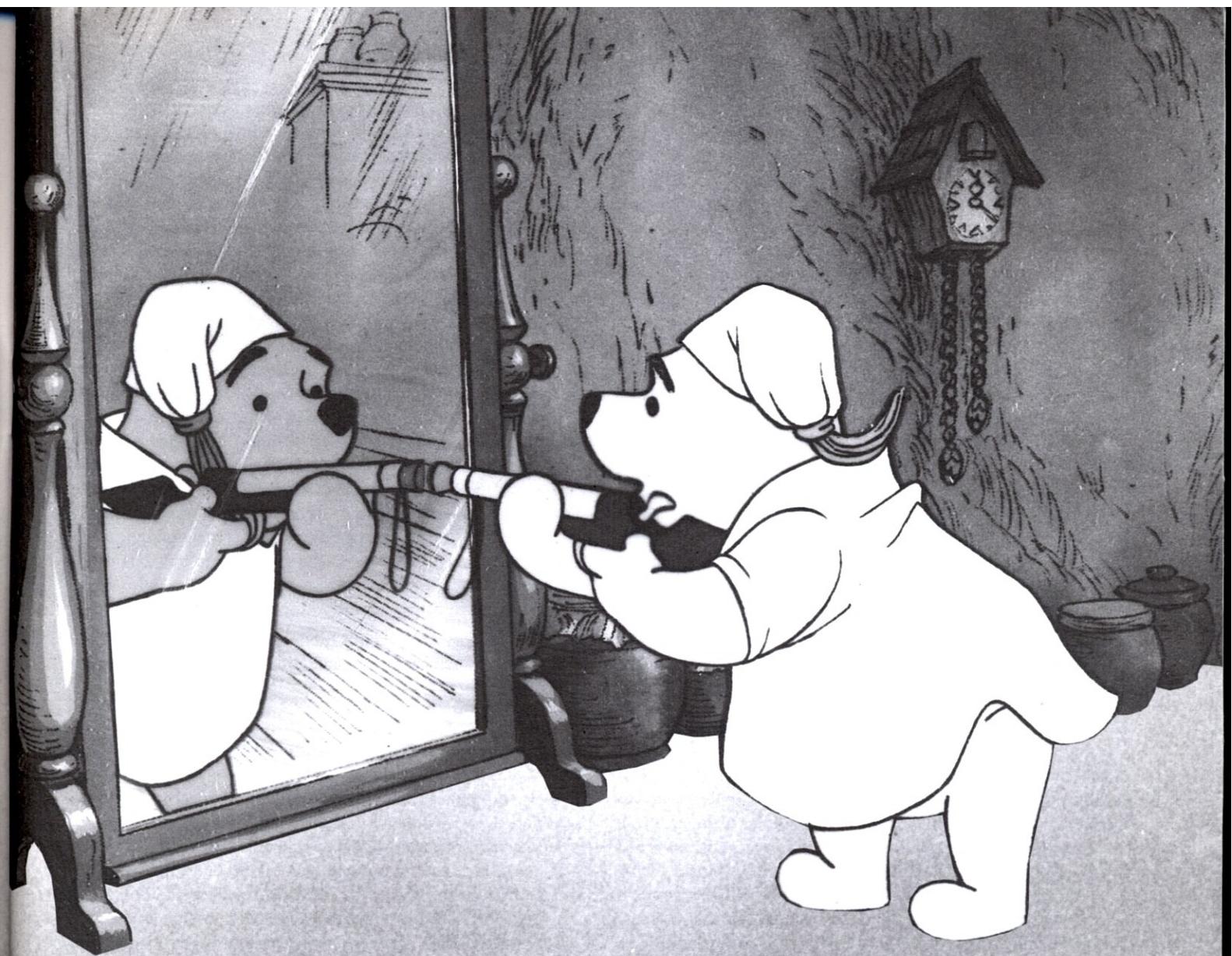
SCOTT MACKENZIE

The greatest moment in Tigger's screen career is in T. Graham's presumably illegal short *Apocalypse Pooh*. soundtrack excerpts from *Apocalypse Now* are laid over brilliantly edited excerpts from Disney's Pooh films, and Tigger's bouncing first entrance is cut to the dialogue from the 'it's a fuckin' tiger' scene from Francis Ford Coppola's 1979 Vietnam epic. Sadly, nothing in this belated series entry [...] comes up to that mark.¹

—Kim Newman, review of *The Tigger Movie* (2000), *Sight & Sound*

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, a sea change was underway in avant-garde and experimental cinema. While many 'old-guard' critics lamented the death of the avant-garde as a meaningful force (Fred Camper's essay "The End of Avant-Garde Film" in the twentieth anniversary issue of the *Millennium Film Journal* comes to mind as a salient example)², a new generation of experimental and avant-garde filmmakers were re-imagining what the avant-garde could and should become. The arrival of feminist, queer and ideological critiques in regards to both avant-garde theory and practice, along with a newfound concern with popular culture and politics, lead to a radical re-imagining of the avant-garde. Perhaps most (in)famously, this at times Oedipal battle played itself out at the "Experimental Film Congress" held in Toronto in 1989, where the new and old guards vied for control over the direction of experimental and avant-garde film.³ One of the key reasons that the avant-garde was seen by 'old boys' (or, less generously, 'almost-dead white men') as being embalmed and buried had quite a bit to do with these newfound political and popular





concerns, and a concurrent move away from high-Modernist preoccupations with film's formal elements to the exclusion of all else. One of the key ways this shift was articulated was in the rise and relative popularity of found footage films.⁴ William C. Wees offers an insightful and succinct definition of avant-garde found footage filmmaking:

While the makers of documentary compilation films draw principally upon the resources of archives and stock shot libraries, avant-garde found footage filmmakers range much farther afield to find their raw material in the bargain bins of camera shops, thrift shops, flea markets, and yard sales; in piles of films discarded by film libraries and other institutions; in dumpsters behind film production houses, labs, and television studios. As artist-archeologists of the film world, found footage filmmakers sift through the accumulated audio-visual detritus of modern culture in search of artifacts that will reveal more about their origins and uses than their original makers consciously intended. Then they bring their findings together in image-sound relationships that offer both aesthetic pleasure and the opportunity to interpret and evaluate old material in new ways.⁵

While found footage films can be traced back through the history of the cinema—with works such as Esther Schub's *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* (1927) and Charles Ridley's *Swinging the Lambeth Walk* (1941)—their emergence as one of the dominant forms of avant-garde filmmaking in the late 1980s and early 1990s points to the fact that the texts and images that inspired this new generation of experimental filmmakers were strikingly divergent from those of their predecessors. Indeed, part of the disdain evinced by commentators like Camper speaks to the move away from the avant-garde auteur as a solitary visionary and a move towards the filmmaker as a cultural worker and critic who is deeply influenced by and engages with popular and mainstream culture. And indeed, this feeling of disdain between the old and the new was mutual. Abigail Child, one of the new generation of avant-garde filmmakers, and who has made found footage films, writes of her first experiences with 'old school' avant-garde filmmaking while in college:

I first saw Brakhage's film work in college, sophomore year: *Dog Star Man* shown along with Len Lye's *Trade Tattoo* and Arthur Lipsett's *Very Nice, Very Nice*. For me as a college student, the Brakhage film was the least favorite. For one thing, there was no humor; for another, what did I have to do with a bearded great man with a dog in the snow trying to climb a slope? Surely I was struck with the mythological dimensions of the effort, but put off simultaneously by the maleness, the overwhelming narcissism, or should I say, solipsism, of the work. This

aspect, in particular, made a negative impression in contrast to the critical, and the light and deep irony of Lipsett's and Lye's work, their ironic worldliness, if you will.⁶

While Child eventually came to admire Brakhage's work, her early experience speaks to the break between past and present taking place in the avant-garde film world. Indeed, one of the many liberating aspects of found footage film was that the means of production were fairly easily to obtain, especially with the advent of video. And with this newfound accessibility, the Situationist process of détournement came to the forefront of found footage aesthetics. As case in point: filmmaker Todd Graham made *Apocalypse Pooh* (1987) as an OCAD (Ontario College of Art and Design) student in the 1980s. One of the true 'underground' films (it has never had any sort of official release), Graham re-edited cartoons from Walt Disney's Winnie the Pooh series of featurettes, released between 1966 and 1977, drawing his détourned images mostly from the first film in the series, *Winnie the Pooh and the Honey Tree* (Wolfgang Reitherman, 1966) and the Academy Award winning second short, *Winnie the Pooh and the Blustery Day* (Reitherman, 1968). He also drew on the live-action framing sequence from the film that was made for the compilation film bringing together the three featurettes: *The Many Adventures of Winnie the Pooh* (Reitherman and John Lounsbery, 1977). Graham then dialectically juxtaposed these images with the soundtrack—along with a few live-action images—from Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979). At key moments, Graham reversed these détourned juxtapositions, deploying images from Coppola's film, and sounds from Reitherman's animated featurettes.

Graham's choice of *Apocalypse Now* as the source material for his détournement is an interesting one, as the image of Coppola as a visionary, high-Modernist *auteur* positions him, in many ways, as the Brakhage of New Hollywood; the solitary iconoclast on a quest for cinematic purity. This isn't the only possible connection one can find between Coppola and experimental cinema; for instance, one of the avant-garde movements that manifests itself throughout Coppola's work is surrealism. In a vast majority of the film reviews of *Apocalypse Now*, the vision professed by Coppola is described as war as hallucination; indeed, more generally, the genre of Vietnam war films themselves are described as such. For instance, Peter Rainer writes: "The Vietnam movie has often been a species of the horror film [...]. Stylistically, no other genre of war film in the history of movies has been so frenzied, so hallucinatory."⁷ It therefore stands to reason that 'détourned animation', a potent synthesis of the radical politics of the 1960s and 1970s with character animation—Hollywood cinema at its most surreal and uncanny—is a ideal mode through which to reconsider representations of Vietnam, its horror and its allure as it came to be represented in mainstream cinema.

The Strange Tale of *Apocalypse Pooh*

As an 'underground' film, *Apocalypse Pooh* had two, unrelated audiences in the pre-Internet era, before its envelopment by the digital world: on the one hand, Graham's film played in some 'underground' and contemporary art forums such as Toronto's

Pleasure Dome collective and the Whitney Museum in New York; on the other hand, *Apocalypse Pooh* also had a sizeable fan following derived from screenings at comic book conventions.⁸ In the days before the Internet, *Apocalypse Pooh* was widely bootlegged, passed around and traded on VHS (other films, such as Todd Haynes' *Superstar: The Life of Karen Carpenter* [1987] or John Greyson's *The Making of 'Monsters'* [1991], had similar modes of distribution, but in the first instance were screened at festivals, and only later went 'underground' as legal issues ensued). One could see Graham's film as an instantiation of comic geek, Situationist samizdat.

Yet the film also spoke to a very different audience. *Apocalypse Pooh* was made at a time where the potential convergence of various imaging technologies was seen as opening radical new possibilities for critical representational strategies in the purported age of postmodernism. As Dot Tuer and Michael Balser wrote in their program notes for the Pleasure Dome 'High Tech/Low Tech: Bodies in Space, An Open Forum on Film and Video Aesthetics' program, at which *Apocalypse Pooh* was screened in 1992:

Does video have a conceptual affinity to cyberspace? Does film reproduce a dream state? How do the structural and historical trajectories of these two time-based mediums respond to the mutating consciousness of McLuhan's information age? Is there purity to form, a specificity of medium, a difference in community formation? These are some of the questions that have arisen in our conversations. The flickering illusions of cinematic space, the cool simulcast immediacy of telecommunications, the relationship of body to place; these are some of the themes that the work touches upon, some of the ideas we would like to engage in presenting this program.⁹

Here, one can again see the schism between the old guard and vanguard avant-gardes in detail. While much of the 'visionary film' school of experimental cinema was profoundly concerned with purity of form, new avant-garde films and filmmakers examined with a critical glee the interstitial nature of moving image technologies. Barriers between media were seen to be disintegrating and therefore the epistemological issues surrounding images shifted from philosophical questions as to the nature of the 'real' (be it material, psychological or spiritual) to larger questions about the nature of moving images themselves and their intertextuality and interconnectedness.

But how did this 'underground' film reconfigure one's understanding of *Apocalypse Now* and become the godparent of today's mash-ups and AMVs? One reason could be that it is expansive in its scope. In its eight minutes, *Apocalypse Pooh* successfully condenses the entire, allegorical, mythological and grandiose narrative of Coppola's film and provides a critical meta-commentary on both *Apocalypse Now* and the Winnie the Pooh featurettes. Therefore, before considering *Apocalypse Pooh* in detail, perhaps some attention should be paid to the films in the Pooh trilogy upon which Graham draws. Disney freely adapt-

ed from A. A. Milne's two Pooh books, *Winnie the Pooh* (1926) and *The House at Pooh Corner* (1928) into three featurettes: the aforementioned *Winnie the Pooh and the Honey Tree*, *Winnie the Pooh and the Blustery Day* and *Winnie the Pooh and Tigger Too* (John Lounsbery, 1974). While there are a plethora of other Pooh films in the Disney catalogue (most of which are television episodes and straight-to-video releases), these three films are the ones closest to Milne's work, in terms of both narrative and style, and together comprise the 'canonized' version of cinematic Pooh.

To better understand the nature of the critique undertaken by Graham, a fairly detailed analysis of *Apocalypse Pooh* is in order. After opening with images of a Vietnamese village being napalmed from *Apocalypse Now* (with the sound accompaniment of the Winnie the Pooh theme and the sound of Pooh's cuckoo clock), we see Winnie the Pooh dragging a popgun behind him, looking tired. In voice-over we hear: "Saigon, shit, I'm still only in Saigon." Cut to an image of Pooh poking his paw into the side of his head, trying to think. What is Pooh thinking?: "I've been here a week now. Waiting for a mission, getting softer." Cut to Pooh sleeping, his dreams fraught with thoughts of: "Every minute I stay in this room I get weaker. And every minute Charlie squats in the bush he gets stronger." Pooh exercises in the mirror, as The Doors play their schizoid anthem "The End" in the background. Cut to Pooh with his head stuck in a honey jar, floating down a river. He realizes things are dire, as he thinks: "I was going to the worst place in the world and didn't even know it yet. Weeks away and hundreds of miles up a river that snaked through the war like a main circuit cable and plugged straight into Kurtz." Here, Graham returns to live-action footage, and cuts to the image of a reel-to-reel tape recorder playing the voice of Kurtz to Willard. And then, returning to the world of animation, the rest of the cast is introduced: We see Rabbit scared in the woods, and the voice-over of Pooh/Willard saying: "The machinist, the one they called Chef, was from New Orleans. He was wrapped too tight for Vietnam, probably wrapped too tight for New Orleans." Cut to an über-young, boyish, innocent Christopher Robin sitting under a tree: "Lance on the forward 50s was a famous surfer from the beaches of South L.A. You look at him and you wouldn't believe he ever fired a weapon in his whole life." Then, cut to Roo, the baby boy kangaroo, happily bouncing on a fence: "Clean, Mr. Clean, was from some South Bronx shithole. Light and space of Vietnam really put a zap on his head." Cut back to a shot of Pooh upside-down in the honey jar, drifting down the river; Owl lands on him, and Pooh/Willard continues: "Then there was Phillips, the Chief. It might have been my mission, but it sure as shit was the Chief's boat." Cut to Pooh, being pulled as if by a kite (he's actually being pulled by Piglet adrift in the air) through the Hundred Acre Forest, to the tune of The Rolling Stones' "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction" (in Coppola's film, it's the water-skiing scene, which is about as plausible as Piglet flying through the air). Pooh's descent (ascent?) to Hell continues, as he floats up into the air on a balloon, Richard Wagner's "Flight of the Valkyries" is heard, along with the ominous sound of approaching choppers. Cut to Gopher coming out of his hole (in *Winnie the Pooh and the Honey Tree*, Gopher is the token American character, and does not appear in the original books). Out of his buck-toothed mouth comes the infamous line: "I love the smell of napalm in the morning." In voice-over we hear Willard/Pooh, describing Gopher/Kilgore: "He was one of



those guys that had that weird light around him. You just knew he wasn't gonna get so much as a scratch here" (perhaps this is because Gopher lives underground). Cut to Pooh stuck in Rabbit's hole, with Gopher standing on him. There's the rising sound of rock music in the background, and then we cut to Pooh floating up the river, head still stuck in a honey jar. In voice-over he says: "Oh man, the bullshit piled up so fast in Vietnam, you needed wings to stay above it." Yes, Pooh is having a bad day, but it is about to get worse. Graham cuts to Pooh in his house, in his night-coat, with his popgun. In the background, there are jungle noises. Then a quick, Eisensteinian montage of Rabbit petrified, and Tigger bouncing into Pooh's house. When Tigger "attacks", screams of "Fucking tiger, Fucking tiger!" fill the void. Cut back again to Pooh stuck in a hole. In voice-over, Pooh/Willard is told: "You're in the asshole of the world, captain!" Then, we cut to Piglet, embodying the unnamed photo-journalist played by Dennis Hopper (Hopper's characters seem to lend themselves to this kind of détournement, as he is also featured in Graham's follow-up film *Blue Peanuts*, where his character Frank, yelling for Pabst's Blue Ribbon in David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1987), turns into Snoopy chugging beer by a player piano) who begins with the salutation: "I'm an American! Yeah, American civilian. Hi Yanks." There is then an extended montage of Piglet sweeping up leaves outside his house, and speaking to himself. He muses: "What are they going to say about him? What, are they going to say, he was a kind man, he was a wise man, he had plans, he had wisdom? Bullshit, man! Am I going to be the one that's going to set them straight? Look at me: wrong!" He continues to speak, as the leaves blow him around:

He's a poet-warrior in the classic sense. I mean, sometimes he'll, uh, well, you'll say hello to him, right? And he'll just walk right by you, and he won't even notice you. And suddenly he'll grab you, and he'll throw you in a corner, and he'll say do you know that if is the middle word in life? If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs and blaming it on you, if you can trust yourself when all men doubt you—I mean I'm no, I can't—I'm a little man, I'm a little man, he's, he's a great man. I should have been a pair of ragged claws scuttling across floors of silent seas—I mean—don't go without me, OK?

Piglet doesn't get the last word, however. Graham returns to live action and cut to images of Marlon Brando as Captain Kurtz, rubbing his bald skull, but from his mouth emerges the depressive bleating of Eeyore, the donkey, saying, "Thanks for nothing" (to be fair, Eeyore makes far more sense than Kurtz in Coppola's film). Further usurping Brando's dialogue is the replacement of Kurtz/Brando's infamous line "The horror, the horror" with Pooh's "Oh, bother; oh, bother", repeated as Graham cuts to an image of Willard's head emerging camouflaged in the river. Then, he cuts to a final live-action image of a stuffed Pooh bear (taken from the conclusion of *The Many Adventures of Winnie the Pooh*), superimposed with the title "The End."

Not only is this surrealist vision an entirely appropriate encapsulation of *Apocalypse Now*, it is also one of the best Pooh films ever made, if not the best, as the détourned characters reveal not only the *Ur-text* to Coppola's film, but also of their own animated images. Furthermore, *Apocalypse Pooh* invites one to revisit the Pooh films, which most viewers probably haven't considered since childhood (after all, they are not a staple of 'Introduction to Film' courses), and read them against the grain, through the glass of colonialism, Coppola and Conrad. This project can lead to strange, yet interesting, results: In *Winnie the Pooh and the Honey Tree*, we are introduced to Pooh and follow him on his (dark) quest for honey, which leads to him expressing his rather colonialist attitude towards bees (he says: "The only reason for bees to make honey is so that I can eat it"). To get this elusive gold substance, he rolls in the mud to camouflage himself as a rain cloud (looking much like Willard in the river at the conclusion of *Apocalypse Now*), then takes a balloon and rises up to the bees' nest to feed off the fruit of their labour. Eventually, the bees organize, revolt, fight back and send Pooh flying through the sky on his rapidly deflating balloon, none the wiser as to why his exploitative ways are wrong (he says: "You never know with bees"). His gluttony then leads to him getting wedged in Rabbit's hole, having to slim down before he can exit, without learning any discernable lesson from his rapacious over-consumption of natural resources. In *Winnie the Pooh and the Blustery Day*, Pooh first encounters Tigger in a mock military manner as he patrols his home with his popgun. Before seeing Tigger himself, he hears him prowling in the (dark) forest; Pooh panics as the unknown 'other' overtakes his imagination. Later, as a storm passing through the Hundred Acre Forest picks up, Pooh is blown through the woods, pulled by Piglet, whose scarf has become a kite-string. Pooh and Piglet are then plastered against Owl's house, which then leads to a pastiche of the cabin scene in Chaplin's *The Gold Rush* (1925)—another film about capitalist greed and the quest for golden substances. Once Owl's house is destroyed, the storm really picks up, and Pooh and Piglet are swept down the swelling river, only to be saved at the last moment. Eeyore finds a new home for Owl, which turns out to be Piglet's flooded house, so Piglet graciously gives up his house and moves in with Pooh (Piglet being the socialist of the lot). Another quasi-military party, replete with marching band, ensues.

While my (re-) readings of these two films are somewhat tongue in cheek, I shall examine later on how unveiling the *Ur-text* of popular culture artifacts is no longer solely the domain of avant-gardists, Situationists and academics, but that this DIY aesthetic is now practiced by video jockeys, mash-ups artists and the producers of AMVs in the (quasi-) mainstream digital forum of cyberspace.¹⁰

Détournement and the Nature of 'Stars'

One of the things that *Apocalypse Pooh* draws into relief is the iconic status of A.A. Milne's characters. While much of the humour generated by *Apocalypse Pooh* comes from the détournement of Coppola's film, this Situationist process also foregrounds the fact that the Pooh characters have a star status similar to iconic figures such as Marilyn Monroe or John Wayne (or, for that matter, Marlon Brando and Dennis Hopper). It does not matter that viewers may not know or recall the narrative of *Winnie the Pooh and the Blustery Day*; instead the film foregrounds the way in which Pooh, Piglet, Christopher Robin, Tigger and the other Milne characters

are understood as larger than the roles played in the films themselves. As Richard Dyer notes:

Because stars have an existence in the world independent of their screen/'fiction' appearances, it is possible to believe (with for instance ideas about the close-up revealing the soul, etc.) that as people they are more real than characters in stories. This means that they serve to disguise the fact that they are just as much produced images, constructed personalities as 'characters' are. Thus the value embodied by the star is as it were harder to reject as 'impossible' or 'false', because the star's existence guarantees the existence of the value he or she embodies.¹¹

Animated characters who, in essence, only exist as screen stars and not as real individuals) raise salient questions about what spectators believe stars to embody, and what they project into them, in an often unreflective popular culture. Certainly, despite the fact that Pooh and his cohorts are lines on paper, they have an existence outside of the animated world. As director Chuck Jones notes about the animated 'star' Daffy Duck in relation to his classic deconstruction of the character in his film *Duck Amuck* (1953): "[. . .] Daffy can live and struggle on an empty screen, without setting and without sound, just as well as with a lot of arbitrary props. He remains Daffy Duck."¹² Animated characters exist in the imagination of viewers and in these imaginings have personalities and ideological positions that extend beyond the diegesis of the text. Indeed, the plethora of marketing campaigns that employ animated 'stars' points to their existence as 'personalities' outside of the narratives of their film appearances. Indeed, it is this very excess that makes *Apocalypse Pooh* a humorous film. One is not simply listening to, say, Martin Sheen's voice-over as if spoken by Winnie the Pooh; one is also watching the incongruity of Pooh thinking, "Shit, I'm still in Saigon." Furthermore, while one needs to be familiar with the narrative of *Apocalypse Now* for the film to make sense, one does not have to be a cinéphile on the scale of Godard for the film to work. *Winnie the Pooh and the Blustery Day* may not be 'quoted' in *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1987-97); this isn't necessary for the viewer to understand the détournement that is taking place. One only needs to be familiar with the 'stars' that populate the Hundred Acre Forest; indeed, Graham's film foregrounds the fact that our knowledge of the characters is greater than our knowledge of the films from which they come. It's this knowledge that allows for us to understand the détournement of both *Apocalypse Now* and *Winnie the Pooh*; it's Graham's ability to make the familiar unfamiliar through humorous dialectical juxtapositions, or as Wees put it, to "reveal more about their [the images] origins and uses than their original makers consciously intended" that uncovers the underlying truths of both films and the way they function in culture in their 'naturalized' forms.

Mash-ups, AMVs and the avant-garde

What is also of interest about *Apocalypse Pooh* is the way in which it blurs the boundaries between the analog and the digital.

Which raises the question: To what degree can *Apocalypse Pooh* be seen as the *Ur-text* or progenitor of today's ubiquitous mash-ups (such as trailer mash-ups, where a film is re-cut into a new trailer, which typically dramatically changes the genre of the film) and AMVs (Anime Music Videos, where animated footage, most often from Japanese Anime films, is re-cut to a new soundtrack)? While mash-ups and AMVs are now ubiquitous on-line, and made all the easier with the advent of iMovie, Moviemaker, Final Cut Pro and Avid, *Apocalypse Pooh* has taken on the status as the genus of these forms. Indeed, *Apocalypse Pooh* has gained a second life on-line, looked upon as both the progenitor and primitive form of mashups and AMVs. In the digital realm, the 'breakthrough' success of trailer mash-ups as viral videos (videos that spread wide and rapidly through the Internet) can be traced to the 2005 mash-up of Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980). Here, video jockey Robert Ryang recuts the Kubrick film into a trailer for a feelgood, family film, where Jack Nicholson is softened and finds a kind of happiness through meeting a young boy, as Peter Gabriel's 'Salisbury Hill' plays in the background. The détournement of the Kubrick film foregrounds the re-narrativization that most often takes place in trailers, and in so doing, also calls into question the ways in which moving images signify and the tenuous relationship between images and the way they are anchored by the soundtrack. Trailer re-mixes and mash-ups also bring to light the fact that film trailers have always been, to a certain extent, found footage films. On sites such as ifilm, there are now a plethora of such trailer mash-ups and re-mixes, such as: 2007's *When Harry Stalked Sally* (*When Harry Met Sally* re-cut as *Fatal Attraction*); Joe Sabia's 2007 mash-up *Good Will Hunted* (*Good Will Hunting* re-cut as a thriller); Chris Rule's 2006 film *Scary Mary Poppins* (*Mary Poppins* as a horror film); Dennis Lyall-Wilson's 2006 trailer mash-up *Scary in Seattle* (*Sleepless in Seattle* as, yet again, *Fatal Attraction*); and Chocolate Cake City's 2006 *Brokeback to the Future* (the *Back to the Future* series re-mixed as a queer romance). AMVs have taken the found footage ethos into a DIY, competitive form, with practices such as 'AMV Iron Chef' competitions, where two video jockeys are given the same source material to re-edit or détourne in a fixed amount of time. The transmogrification of avant-garde found footage films into popular forms, such as mash-ups, trailer re-mixes and AMVs is in no way a new development; an interstitial relationship between the avant-garde and the mainstream has existed since the cinema's inception (Chaplin's appropriation by the avant-garde is a key example; *Apocalypse Pooh* itself is another). Much the way the works of Brakhage, Kenneth Anger, Bruce Conner and Bruce Baillie can be seen as key stylistic forbearers to the aesthetic of the music video and MTV, Graham's work, and that of found footage filmmakers such as Keith Sanborn, Craig Baldwin, Peggy Awesh and Matthias Müller—amongst many others—can be seen as the avant-garde precursors to the DIY emergence of found footage mash-ups and AMVs on-line (indeed, in tracing these various *Ur*-histories, one could also argue that the concluding twenty minutes of Coppola's *The Godfather, Part III* (1990) is a mash-up of the first two Godfather films and Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana*).¹³ And, like many found footage films produced by the avant-garde, mash-ups and video jockeys are developing a self-reflexive, participatory, critical and political edge. In a recent article in *The Guardian* on mash-ups and video jockeying Danny Bradbury notes:

Kent Bye, a Maine-based engineer and filmmaker, is preparing an Alpha-version of a collaborative on-line editing system for the Echochamber Project, a video documentary analyzing media coverage of the run up to the Iraq war. Bye will make the audio of 45 hours of raw footage available on-line. Volunteers are transcribing and tagging the audio with their own descriptions. "Citizen editors" will then be able to resequence the audio to create their own remixes of interviews, which Bye hopes to use as a guide during the final video-editing process. He is also considering Flash-based online editing tools to make video mashups possible. "What I'm really interested in is how you can use a distributed set of people to put that kind of research into a collaborative film-making approach," he says.¹⁴

Instead of arguing that the avant-garde is being appropriated, tamed, denaturalized or otherwise corrupted by its incorporation into the mainstream, perhaps one should instead celebrate the fact that, like the appropriations made by found footage filmmakers of popular culture, the avant-garde practices undertaken by DIY video jockeys, mash-up artists and AMV producers speak not to a dilution of radical art and aesthetics, but its termite-like function as a means of critique within the quasi-mainstream. If something as honey-sweet as Winnie the Pooh can be détourned and then celebrated by the avant-garde, comic geeks and on-line artists, then perhaps there are still points of resistance against the ideological conformity triumphed as 'realist' in most mainstream image-making. Furthermore, the *process* of unpacking a text, or re-working it and showing its ideological underbelly becomes the goal of radical cultural production, instead of simply accepting the images rampant in culture, and consuming them like so much honey. And of course, the ever-ubiquitous Pooh has been used to explore these kinds of issues before; Benjamin Hoff writes in his book *The Tao of Pooh*:

The honey doesn't taste so good once it has been eaten; the goal doesn't mean so much once it has been reached; the reward is not so rewarding once it has been given. If we add up all the rewards in our lives, we won't have very much. But if we add up all the spaces between the rewards, we'll come up with quite a bit. [. . .] Each time a goal is reached, it becomes Not So Much Fun, and we're off to reach the next one, then the next one, then the next. That doesn't mean the goal doesn't count. They do, mostly because the cause us to go through the process, and it's the process that makes us wise, happy, whatever. [. . .] What could we call the moment before we eat the honey? Some call it anticipation, but I think it's more than that. We could call it awareness. It is when we become happy and realize it, if

only for an instant. By Enjoying the Process, we can stretch that awareness out so it's no longer only a moment, but covers the whole thing. Then we can have a lot of fun. Just like Pooh.¹⁵

Or, one could add, the journey of Willard. Indeed, the above reading of Pooh encapsulates the narrative of both *Apocalypse Now* and *Apocalypse Pooh*, the philosophical issues raised by both films, the critique of dominant culture sallied forth by the avant-garde in its myriad of analog and digital forms.

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Notes

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- 2 Fred Camper, "The End of Avant-Garde Film," *Millennium Film Journal* 17/18/19 (1986-87): 99-125.
- 3 For a survey of the debates surrounding the Toronto Experimental Film Congress and the manifesto written as a riposte to it, see William C. Wees, "'Let's Set the Record Straight': The International Experimental Film Congress, Toronto 1989," *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 9.1 (2000): 101-116. For an overview of the goals of the Congress, see *International Experimental Film Congress* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1989).
- 4 While the literature on found footage films keeps growing in its own rhizomatic way, some key texts on the subject are: Jay Leyda, *Films Beget Films: A Study of the Compilation Film* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1964); Sharon Sandusky, "The Archeology of Redemption: Towards Archival Films," *Millennium Film Journal* 26 (1993): 3-25; William C. Wees, *Recycled Images: The Art and Politics of Found Footage Films* (New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1993); Scott MacKenzie, "Flowers in the Dustbin: Termite Culture and Detritus Cinema," *CinéAction* 47 (1998): 24-29; Michael Zryd, "Found Footage Film as Metahistory: Craig Baldwin's *Tribulation 99*," *The Moving Image* 3.2 (2003): 40-61 and Adrian Danks, "The Global Art of Found Footage Cinema" in Linda Badley, R. Barton Palmer and Steven Jay, eds. *Traditions in World Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006): 241-253.
- 5 William C. Wees, "From Compilation to Collage: The Found Footage Films of Arthur Lipsett," *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 16.2 (2007).
- 6 Abigail Child, "Notes on Sincerity and Irony," in David E. James, *Stan Brakhage: Filmmaker* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005): 196.
- 7 Peter Rainer, "Vietnam Hot Damn" in Rainer, ed. *Love and Hisses* (San Francisco: Mercury House, 1992): 470.
- 8 Daniel Clowes, a leading alternative comix artist, documents this popularity in the letter column of his comic *Eightball* (the basis of the Terry Zwigoff film *Ghost World*), published by Fantagraphics.
- 9 Dot Tuer and Michael Balser, Program Notes for "High Tech/Low Tech: Bodies in Space, An Open Forum on Film and Video Aesthetics" Pleasure Dome, Toronto, Ontario, July 17, 1992.
- 10 For a more 'traditional' encapsulation of the plots of these films, see Christopher Finch, *Disney's Winnie the Pooh* (New York: Disney Books, 2002).
- 11 Richard Dyer, *Stars* (London: BFI, 1979): 22.
- 12 Cited in Leonard Maltin, *Of Mice and Magic: A History of American Animated Cartoons*. rev. ed. (New York: NAL, 1987): 263.
- 13 For more on the interweaving of these two narratives, see Scott MacKenzie, "Closing Arias: Operatic Montage in the Closing Sequences of the Trilogies of Coppola and Leone," *p.o.v.: A Danish Journal of Film Studies* 16 (1998): 109-124.
- 14 Danny Bradbury, "Jockeying for Attention" *The Guardian* 20 April 2006.
- 15 Benjamin Hoff, *The Tao of Pooh* (London: Penguin, 1982): 111-112

Towards a Theory of Virtual Pornography

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INTRODUCTION TO INTERACTIVE SEX SIMULATORS IN THE “NAÏVE REALIST” PARADIGM

KEVIN WYNTER

To prefer the virtual being—at some remove—to the real being—close up—is to take the shadow for the substance, to prefer the metaphor, the clone to a substantial being who gets in your way, who is literally on your hands, a flesh and blood being whose only fault is to be there, here and now, and not somewhere else.¹

—Paul Virilio

In the epilogue to her seminal work on moving-image pornography *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure and the “Frenzy of the Visible,”* Linda Williams asks, “what is the spectatorial experience of viewing and ‘interacting’ with sexual objects in a virtual cyberspace?”² The following will attempt to provide some answers.

Questions of virtual pornography are inseparable from corporeal experience. The fundamental constituents of this experience include the embodied perception and active look/solicited gaze³ of the viewer/participant, a sense of trans-spatial disembodiment manifested in an avatar substituting as a digitized sexual prosthesis for the viewer/participant, and the decentralization of vision manifesting in proliferating *selves*, and subsequently, its appeal to a mnemonically resonant *a priori* imaging-consciousness to unify multiple instances of vision and corporeality into a singular illusory experience. Each constituent equally participates in the metaphorization of intersubjective sexual union where, as Virilio claims, the shadow is taken for the substance.

It would be a mistake to trivialize Virilio’s warning as nothing more than fatalist prophesizing or polemical fear mongering, originating in neo-Luddite theory, over the waning tactility of intersubjective contact in the age of virtuality. The intention of his critique is to provide a necessary resistance against the near unconscious assimilability of new technologies into everyday existence. For this reason it is with some reservation that I appro-

priate Michael Heim’s term “naïve realist”⁴ in situating the tradition of inquiry from which Virilio speaks. Heim’s term suggests lacking judgment and sophistication and as I intend to continue this tradition of inquiry in an effort to identify certain pernicious characteristics of virtual pornography, it would not be in the best interest of my argument (rarely should it ever be) to speak from a position ‘lacking sophistication.’ In this sense, to call oneself a “naïve realist” is a calculated risk, but a necessary one if I wish to acknowledge an open dialectical space for future critical intervention. In other words, what follows should not be regarded as a document chiseled in stone, but rather as a set of preliminary propositions inaugurating a detailed phenomenological critique of Interactive Sex Simulators (ISS) and the deleterious potential they pose to lived sexual perception.

A Brief History

As far back as 1979, Lynn Hershman’s interactive video installations have sought to reconcile the divide between virtual and lived space with works “about the interaction and intimacy of people despite technological separation.”⁵ Hershman’s installation *Lorna* (1979) is generally regarded as the urtext of erotic virtual interactive media as it provided participants with an attenuated level of interactivity modulated by a limited number of narrative possibilities selected *in medias res*; the navigation of branching narratives contingent solely on the participant’s choices. Hershman would go further with her follow-up effort *Deep Contact* (1984) in attempting to suture the incompossible spaces of the *virtual* and the *actual*/with an installation where the interface consisted principally of a female figure in which portions of her fragmented body act as navigational tools or portals toward increasing interactivity. At one point in the installation the female figure goes so far as to knock on what appears to be the glass



partition (fantasy's threshold) separating herself from the participant. The work culminates in the figure uttering the request, "try to push your way through the screen and touch me." The appearance of both *Lorna* and *Deep Contact* is seminal not merely for the formal ingenuity of both or for the contribution each makes to installation art at the time, but must also be considered significant in a broader tradition of emerging visual technologies taking the sexualized bodies of women as its principal subject. In fact, the history of moving images itself is predicated on displayed bodies.

Prehistoric "cinema" (Marey and Muybridge especially) concentrated its efforts on capturing the "unseeable truths" of bodies in motion by mechanically recording "animal locomotion" in various states of activity.⁶ Noteworthy here is the ubiquity of the nude form in these early experiments with chrono-photography. Although both men and women were recorded nude with relatively the same frequency, Linda Williams notes that, "while naked and semi-naked women perform many of [the] same tasks [as men], in their activities and gestures we see how the greater sexuality already culturally encoded in the woman's body feeds into a new cinematic power exerted over her whole physical being."⁷ Or as Foucault would later posit, "...power exerted over bodies *in* technology is rendered pleasurable *through* technology."⁸

Little wonder then how or why Hershman chose the female form as her inaugural interactive subject. The sexually coded female figure well established over centuries of representation in the tradition of European oil painting was now thrust into the "accelerated intensity"⁹ of mechanical reproduction to be "mas-sified" and proliferated at an exponential rate, a proliferation that would lead John Berger to conclude: "...by generalizing both sight and viewer and making sexuality unspecific, desire (was turned into) fantasy."¹⁰ Hershman plays upon this sense of fantasy perfectly and, though contextually dissimilar, predates the popularized ISS by 20 years when the female figure of *Deep Contact* insists the participant "push" his way "through the screen."¹¹

My Plaything.../Virtual Sex with...

...it is the paradoxical nature of a (virtual) 'there' that seems to offer an escape from the presence and immediacy of the human body that needs to be examined in virtual porn.¹²

—Linda Williams

Unlike Williams who based her examination of virtual pornography on several "adult interactive computer games," my analysis is based not on video games, but on simulators. There are significant differences between the two as Digital Sin's *My Plaything...* series and Digital Playground's *Virtual Sex with...* series will help to illustrate. These ISSs are paradigmatic, sharing a principal format and schematic interface that hierarchizes sexual activity into *types* and *subsets*; for example, intercourse would serve as a *type* and its *subsets* may include various positions (missionary, doggie, reverse cowgirl, etc.) and levels of intensity. Selecting a *type* from the interface opens up the attendant *subsets*, but shifts between *subsets* are precluded by the structure of the hierarchy. The strictures imposed by the hierarchy on the participant's ability to shift between *subsets* and the subsequent experience of control-as-

limitation is moderated by the availability of several other functions of mastery. Icons are provided within the interface of the ISS that a participant can highlight and select if he wishes to change his virtual partner's demeanor (the options being "naughty" or "nice"), change viewing positions, control the intensity of his virtual partner's vibrator or make his avatar or virtual partner "Cum on Q." It is also significant to note that ISSs are the only forms of pornography to consistently rely on the use of *counterfeit money shots* to represent the veracity of male pleasure.¹³

ISSs privilege the POV shot of the male participant¹⁴ and his avatar whose body is halved from the mid-section down. In the conspicuous absence of the objective male body within the virtual environment (no establishing shots, no voice and no shots above chest level of the avatar) the visual perspectives (POV) of the avatar and participant are married. The virtual woman almost always directly addresses the wedded perspective of the virtual/actual man and is never distanced beyond a medium-shot from this twinned gaze. The frame typically remains static except when illusory demands necessitate its dislodgement, as in the case of virtually performing cunnilingus whereby the parameters of the frame become expressly analogous to the perceptual boundaries of vision; or, more simply, the frame moves as one's perception of depth might if in actuality he were performing oral sex on a female partner.

In the case of the *My Plaything...* series the virtual environments tend to be recognizable locations (a massage parlour, an office, a mansion, etc.), which in turn directly motivate, by context, the character of the virtual woman. For example, if the virtual woman is situated in a classroom it should follow that her appearance, depending on whether or not the fantasy calls for submission or dominance, will take the form of a short-skirted, acquiescent student or a ruler-wielding, conservatively dressed teacher. These fantasmatic spaces are ostensibly familiar and eerily abstract (or as Freud might say, *unheimlich*), producing an experience of lacking anchorage to the living world. In some sense, these virtual environments may be conceived of, in Deleuzian terms, as "any-space-whatevers"¹⁵ insofar as they represent a reconceptualization and defamiliarization of empirical spatial experience. Following Deleuze's lead (here appropriated out of context), Mark Hansen usefully frames Deleuze's concept in the register of the digital when writing, "it is like the cinematic any-space-whatever in that it demarcates a fundamental shift in the experience of space, a shift from an extended, visually apprehensible space to a space that can be felt only by the body."¹⁶ The participant is invited to "experience" a space he is familiar with, but one that has no discernable geo-physical coordinates. What results is a paradoxical experience of compassed dislocation where one simultaneously knows and does not know where one is.¹⁷

In the *Virtual Sex with...* series we are faced with an inverse scenario: the virtual environment consists entirely of black space without any geographic markers or objects (save the occasional vibrator or dildo). What we are confronted with then is what Mark Hansen might call a "digital-any-space-whatever." Hansen explains,

..the digital-any-space-whatever comprises a bodily response to a stimulus that is both literally unprecedented and radically heterogeneous to the form of

embodied human experience. To put it more simply: because it must be forged out of a radically inhuman realm, the digital-any-space-whatever lacks an originary contact with a space of human activity...and thus any underlying analogy—from which affect can be extracted.¹⁸

The black, "inhuman realm(s)" comprising the diegesis of the *Virtual Sex with...* series are "digital-any-space-whatevers" *par excellence*, spaces where sexual union in its heightened, fantastic state displaces corporeal perception from its last vestiges of experiential reality, disoriented as it is in virtuality, and confers it upon nothing but *pure space*.

So, then, concomitant with the telesexual decentralization of the *self* dispersed through a circuit of analogous visual perspectives is the fabrication of polymorphous space. In the first instance (*My Plaything...*) one's virtual environs are formed from depthless signifiers¹⁹ proffering an impression of reality unable to achieve a sense of multi-dimensionality, buckling, as it does, beneath the insurmountable weight of the sexual fantasy it backdrops. In the second instance (*Virtual Sex with...*) the geophysical world is ejected from the scene and any object whatsoever disqualified from the space, to remain only as such, *just space*. As if avatar and woman were launched up through the ether, into outer space and propelled past the stars to consummate this next stage of sexuality in the nothingness of the *final frontier*.

In the course of enumerating some key features of interactive sex simulation and for the sake of clarification we might briefly digress to illustrate how the simulator form is fundamentally incommensurable with the video game form. ISSs and Interactive Adult video games, though similar in appearance, are quite dissimilar: the latter is, by nature, temporally bound to a linear structure and demand that arbitrary hurdles be leapt in order for progression to occur, inevitably leading toward achieving a particular goal (ex. *Virtual Vixens*). Moreover, video games (particularly "First Person" games) have a tendency to use "cinematics" or cut scenes to narrativize the action with plot segments utilizing the codes of Hollywood cinema. Conversely, ISSs are barrier-free, non-linear structures that establish manifold linkages the participant is free to make whenever he chooses. ISSs only abstractly narrativize action to initially construct the fantasy and when doing so rarely break from the avatar's POV.

Within each ISS, representations of body and space bring with them an entirely new set of propositions regarding the depiction of sexuality, its conduct, and its attendant phenomenological experience, leading us to reiterate the question, "what is the spectatorial experience of viewing and 'interacting' with sexual objects in a virtual cyberspace?"

Three States of Consciousness: Exteroception/Interoception/Proprioception, or Virtual Sexuality and its Vicissitudes

ISSs pose a variety of questions regarding perceptual states and the experience of mutable spaces in several registers of consciousness, one of which is *exteroception*. All things appertaining to the excitation of sense organs from stimuli outside of the body are *exteroceptive*. The effectiveness of a simulator in "provid[ing] an operating imitation of a real activity"²⁰ is predicated on its

ability to reproduce contextually specific effects on the human sensorium. In aerospace research the flight simulator is designed to appropriate the perceptual conditions and affective responses of actual flight to the highest possible degree for the participant of the simulation. It achieves this by replicating dromoscopic sight lines, "real" force-feedback from cockpit controls, reproducing soundscapes and simulating various psychological conditions (i.e. flying a passenger airliner contra flying a jet fighter) procured through the illusion of flight. For pilots, it serves as both a perceptual model for training sensorial responses and eliciting necessary reactions to a given situation, as well as a pedagogical tool in aid of developing required skill sets.

From the flight simulator to the sex simulator, from the illusion of aeronautics to the illusion of copulation, it can be said that both *exteroceptions* are fundamentally of the same order. Regardless of intention or purpose each simulation postures reality through an imaginary spectacle requiring similar sensorial engagement. The sex simulator, like the flight simulator, necessitates an active spectatorship to negotiate the *types* and *subsets*²¹ particular to a given interface while employing the participant's sensorium to such a degree that ascribing the pleasures accumulated by his avatar to his own body seems logical.

As the POV shot is the privileged perspective of both the flight simulator form and the sex simulator form and appeals directly to the *exteroceptive* reality of the subject in synchronizing the experience of virtual materiality with actual materiality, might we not say that ISSs, like flight simulators, are capable of pedagogical effects? And if there are pedagogical consequences resulting from the consciousness of a virtual reality by an *exteroceptive* reality, how might we account for the bridging of this gap between these two varying impressions? In his doctoral dissertation, and with particular erudition, Ryan Joseph Burns makes recourse to Barry Brummett's "Homology Hypothesis" to help explain how one might link the perception of mediated pornography to a lived intersubjective encounter. Burns writes,

The Homology Hypothesis maintains that when there are formal parallels among content, experience, and medium, the content affects the audience's motives for living through "real" or unmediated experiences. The message in the medium gains its power from emphasis and repetition, and this occurs when the medium makes the same points found in formal links between content and experience, as well as a representational experience of the account. As both an experience and a representation, 'the medium does this by serving as a formal bridge between the fictitious media content on the one hand, and the real world on the other'...*The medium is a real experience but in an imaginary, fictive context...*²² (Italics mine)

The threshold of the interface and the transhorizon perspective it gives rise to serves as an interstice between two homologous perceptions (one actual, one virtual) addressed directly by the woman within the simulator. Apropos of ISSs, Burn's use of Brummett's "Homology Hypothesis" suggests that the technological partition of the apparatus is not an object inertly facilitating or mediating an experience, but is an accessory to the

complex facets of the sex simulator and is complicit in the effects it produces. The absolute control wielded by the participant over the actions of the simulator woman and the pleasure she imparts upon his avatar is achieved directly through his actual control of the interface. Thus, actual tactile control of the technology facilitating the control of the virtual interface engenders a sense of mastery in two registers that amplify rather than interfere with one another.

Ultimately, ISSs necessarily seek to elicit *exteroceptive* responses to virtual sexual experience homologous to those of actual experience; like the flight simulator, this is the purpose of the simulator form. It achieves this by privileging the subject position of the participant through the imaginary subject position of his avatar and concentrating the sum of the simulated woman's attention toward him. Along with positions of mastery accorded to his visual and auditory fields, the participant's tactile manipulation of the optoelectronic interface assures him complete control over all available aspects of sexual representation, consequently returning to Foucault's assertion, "...power exerted over bodies in technology is rendered pleasurable through technology." If Foucault is right and Burns' use of Brummett's theory is indeed tenable, with the pedagogical capabilities of the simulator form, such as they are, we can conceive of the ISS as a training apparatus where the experience of sexuality is configured as a unilateral conjunction of phallic pleasure and control.

At a purely external level of meaning the subject's *exteroception* registers the qualitative impressions of the simulator, but beyond the realm of empirical reality an *exteroceptive* analysis proves limited. Understanding the sex simulator form requires a critique that breaches the illusion of the participant's ostensible sexual mastery, or rather his *transmastery* of *virtual* and *actual* pleasure experienced simultaneously in incompossible registers by an empirically multiplied, yet psychically unified self. This illusion is the ISSs greatest (and most alarming) achievement: to phenomenalize alterity and mask the dementia of an intentionally fabricated aesthetic of disembodyment that concurrently purports to offer the "most realistic sexual encounter ever."²³ The success of this illusion is predicated on the "subjective feeling states" elicited at an *exteroceptive* level of consciousness and subsequently internalized at an imaginary level where these feeling states take on idiosyncratic meaning for each participant. This idiosyncratic meaning might be expressed more precisely through two internal states of consciousness: *interoception* and *proprioception*.

Traditional definitions suggest that *interoceptions* are not predictable of external stimuli since they relate particularly to a physiological awareness of the self and sensitivity to (consciousness of) internal stimuli *a priori* independent of the external world. Contrapuntally, it may prove productive to conceive of *interoceptions* having resonance with *exteroceptions* rather than remaining mutually exclusive. In elaborating a phenomenology of virtual sexuality, or any discussion of virtuality whatsoever, the primary issue remains with the participant and the altered states of his bodily experience. Charles Tart's concept of the *body image* is a useful paradigm in this regard as he demonstrates *interoceptive* consciousness occurs at a physiological level from input within the body, but is also susceptible to the body's aggregate of external experiences. In *States of Consciousness*, Tart writes, "you not only have a real body whose actual sensations are picked up

by the *interoceptors*, but, in the course of enculturation, you have learned to perceive your own body in learned, patterned ways, just as you have learned to perceive the external world in socially learned ways. The degree to which your body image corresponds to your actual body may vary considerably."²⁴ Along with the body's consciousness of internal corporeal input, Tart proposes a symbolic dimension to *interoceptive* reality independent of actually occurring internal stimuli. How the subject perceives alterity visually represented in the ISS's aesthetic of disembodyment as a singular experience comes into sharper focus through Tart's notion of *body image*. Tart goes on to write, "an individual's body image may be very stable. An intriguing example of this is the *phantom limb* phenomenon. When an arm or a leg is amputated, the patient almost always reports he can still feel the limb, even though he can see and otherwise intellectually know it is not there."²⁵ In some regard does the masturbatory utility of the ISS not give way to the participant's sense of his corporeal locus of pleasure as the *penis qua phantom limb*? The subject's willing surrender of his intellectual acumen in knowing "it is not there" does not stop him from *feeling* pleasures performed on the avatar's body.

Thus, one would not be amiss to suggest the participant's *body image* allows him to refer the sex acts performed on his avatar to his own body, thereby onanistically achieving an irrational fidelity between incompossible space-time events. The participant's *interoception* of his pleasure center is thus mirrored with the *quasi-interoception* of his avatar and any excitatory visuals registered at an *exteroceptive* level as alterity are ostensibly unified in an *interoceptive* register where the actual (I am here before the interface) and the virtual (I am there inside the interface) are blurred in the imaginary (I am here and there, but the pleasure is one). This is an important distinction because it is not a matter of the participant believing that he has *literally* crossed over into virtual space and is in direct contact with the woman in the interface. This is not how the ISS achieves its effects.²⁶ In *Hard Core*, Williams similarly remarks, "...I would argue that today's 'interactive' sensation seekers do not really think they are actually immersed in the virtual worlds depicted. Their pleasure seems to lie elsewhere."²⁷ This sense of "elsewhere" Williams suggests, a "vague intuitive zone" as Sartre might have called it, can be located in the register of the imaginary.²⁸ The fantasmatic scene offered by the ISS draws its affect not from a tangible intellectual belief, but from a suspended disbelief sustained in the imaginary where incongruencies in perception and pleasure sensibly coalesce; an imaging-consciousness rationalizing the phenomenological dementia of interactive sex simulation vis-à-vis Burns' "fictional context" and/or an associational awareness through the participant's sense-memory (corporeal context) allowing him to more easily braid fantasy with reality.

Corporeally, sense-memory may be apprehended at a *proprioceptive* level of consciousness. Through repetition the body can become acclimated to given sets of action. *Proprioception* acts as a kind of *sixth sense* unconsciously regulating muscle coordination in response to *exteroceptive* stimuli requiring movement, "it is the sense that indicates whether or not your body is moving with required effort, as well as where the various parts of the body are located in relation to each other."²⁹ Buttressing a suspension of disbelief in the imaginary (an act of consciousness) sustaining the heteromorphous relationship between man and

avatar is an unconscious *proprioception* in charge of "second nature" bodily responses to stimuli. So, as a higher order active consciousness negotiates its *body image* in the wake of selective suspensions of actuality and the fantasmatic supports that procure illusions of visceral sexual activity, *proprioception* does the job of ensuring that the body maintains its motor-sensory awareness of space by responding accordingly to the external stimulus. These *proprioceptive* responses have two dimensions³⁰ operating simultaneously: a developmental stage where sense-memory is trained and acts *become* "second nature," and the function of sense-memory acquired through repetition whereby actions *are* "second nature." Thus, as a clear and present state of (un)consciousness, *proprioception* habituates the spectacle of the simulator for the participant, replete with its elision of male identity in lieu of an illusory projection of the *self* across the threshold of the interface, alongside his lived intersubjective sense memories where, at its most extreme, one indiscriminately telescopes into the next.

After the pedagogy of the simulator's representation of actuality at the level of *exteroception* comes the *meta-pedagogy* of the muscular system at the level of *proprioception*, to say nothing of the illusory support of an *interoceptive* consciousness actively masking the pedagogical and meta-pedagogical implications of "...a virtual reality that offers...us a considerable advantage of being both more *real* than imagination and more easily controlled than concrete reality."³¹

Might we not relate the interplay of these states of consciousness appertaining to virtual sexuality to the drama of identity formation in the Lacanian "mirror stage?" All of the constituents, to some degree, are present: the subject identifying with its own image/reflection, the misrecognition of the image as a unified self inspiring future identification processes, the incommensurability of the perceived powers held by the image in contradistinction to the ineffectual body, and the formation of an "Ideal-I" toward which the subject will perpetually strive.

Although, in some sense, is also not the opposite the case? In virtual sexuality the reflection of the body in the looking glass gives way to an extension of the body in the interface where the subject's effectual body controls and manipulates its identificatory image as it sees fit, with questions of the formation of an "Ideal-I" toward which the subject strives left open to conjecture.

Suffice it to say there are numerous rich and complex areas requiring investigation in the problematic of the *self qua other* and the *other qua self* in sex simulation. By way of illustrating the role played by particular states of consciousness engaged in sex simulation we have endeavored to construct a theory that elaborates the perniciousness of deriving sexual pleasures through representations of bodily dispersal. The ways in which ISSs link pleasure with the disunification of subjectivity transcends traditional notions of alterity as a *self/other* binarism and gives way to the phenomenality of an increased polymorphic otherness.

Circuits of Vision

The Third "Self"

The visual and visceral pleasures solicited by [ISS] seem not to be aiming for an extreme reality effect (as in, "this is real! I am there playing with her!) but rather for an uncanny sense of dispersal (as in, the

more divided and distracted "I" am here playing with myself and "I" am also there playing with the vixen!). In this sense "interactivity" could be defined not as an exchange or communication between self and other but rather as the mobility of a "self" interacting with two vying impressions of reality each of which is slightly lessened in effect by the interference of the other.³²

—Linda Williams

It is not unusual in dreaming life to experience states of alterity or several different concurrent states of awareness. Lucid dreamers are said to be able to experience multiple *selves* on a plane of suspended consciousness achieved during sleep. Accounts of lucid dreaming describe heightened states of awareness in which the suspended consciousness of sleep gives rise to the consciousness of a dreaming self experiencing the phenomena of a dreamt reality. This dreaming consciousness is said to be aware of itself and of the suspended consciousness of the inert physical body, but what is more remarkable is the fluidity of this dreaming consciousness in manifesting alternate states of consciousness that remain constantly aware of a *higher consciousness* in spite of dispersal. "I became perfect nothingness going into perfect nothingness. The part of me that had not yet gone through [the object] was experiencing overwhelming ecstasy, so much so that I could hear myself moaning from it and had to observe this experience from a third self,"³³ recounts one lucid dreamer whose feeling of ecstasy in dreaming consciousness was such that it could only be appreciated from the observatory position of an even further divided consciousness, "*a third self*." This lucid dreamer goes on to write, "eager to experience the ecstasy again, I leaned over and kissed [the object]. Once again, I experienced overwhelming ecstasy, that *had to be observed from a third self*."³⁴

Lucid dreaming offers at least three vying impressions of reality: the first self—the self that is sleeping, the second self—the dreaming self, and the third self—the observer. Transubstantiation from the first self to the second self occurs as an ethereal extension of the living body into an alternate *bodily* state of consciousness. The experience of "overwhelming ecstasy" in the register of the second self is said to be a catalyst for the dispersal of consciousness into a purely optical third self whose only function is to witness the pleasure of the ethereal body. Similarly, ISSs offer 3 vying impressions of reality through a perspectival projection in stages, successively increasing the sensation of being 'divided' and self-objectified (the thrill of corporeal loss). The first perceptual move away from an embodied "I" resides in the transference of the participant's optical sightline (visual perception in the first degree) and an investment of subjective vision into the optical sightline of the apparatusal POV shot whereby the participant becomes a "corporealized observer";³⁵ or rather, the "vision" of the avatar is a *new* disembodied perception extended from the body's primary optical sightline. In other words, the participant looking into the interface, across its horizon and into the virtual environment can be described as the primary instance of vision. The participant's virtual double, which he is bound with at an identificatory level, is presumed to possess its own optical facility. This can be described as a secondary instance of vision, the vision of the participant's "second self."

This is the “uncanny sense of dispersal” between “two vying impressions of reality” Williams refers to, but ISSs, like the experience of lucid dreaming, offer a third impression. All ISSs provide a second or alternative camera angle from which to view the action. This second angle is typically situated 60 to 90 degrees away from the original coordinates of the POV shot maintaining a relative focal length. What is noteworthy about this move is its static depiction of what has already occurred, but from a perspective outside the POV of the avatar (secondary instance of vision) that leaves one with a feeling of being uncanny. The participant has the sensation that he is viewing events from a third instance of vision, or rather, from *a third self*. Expressed differently, the primary visual code of virtual sexuality is the POV shot and the reasons for its use, by now, are obvious. What is of significance here is the second shot or angle ISSs elect to utilize: a static shot, outside of the visual scope of the POV shot, that brings the viewer into closer proximity to what the original POV shot depicts.

This second shot highlights an odd conundrum: the POV shot is not the visual identificatory code that raises the level of visual pleasure or experiential reality from the image to new heights as is purported or as it first may seem. At work is a three-pronged visual circuit that achieves optical inebriation in the second shot/angle (third instance of vision) through the illusion of the participant’s *total disembodiment* and sexual decentralization. A mirage of hallucinatory mastery over the virtual flesh event where one can identify with a body not only outside of one’s own, but *outside of one’s own double*. This is a citational chain of projection that begins at the level of the body and is mediated through a virtual double, subsequently achieving erotic acme in the move to a doubly disembodied, ‘impossible’ observatory state: *a third self*.

As in lucid dreaming, the “overwhelming ecstasy” of disembodied pleasure in interactive sex simulation is such that a *third self* is provided as an optional perspective from which to observe one’s enraptured otherness. How then can ISSs lay claim to providing the “most realistic sex experience ever” when the experience exhibits more commonalities with ethereal dream states than intersubjective reality? This claim of realism could only be tenable if in fact sex increased in realism congruent with the disequilibrium of corporeality, conflating, as it does, the pleasures of sexuality with increasing disembodied (di)visions. Therefore, if the body’s tactility is no longer able to constitute “real sex,” sexual authenticity in the 21st century will be corroborated to some degree by the pleasures experienced in the “perfect nothingness” of *eyes without a face*.

From Disembodiment to Disappearance

If we quote Virilio at length from *War and Cinema* and paraphrase his text by supplementing its key terms to suit our context (which we will italicize) what occurs is an uncannily fitting diagnosis of the fate of sexual visual perception. An endeavor of this sort would read as follows:

This total transparency affecting object, subject and surrounding space—which makes the corporealized observer feel both that he is being watched by his virtual partner and that he is observing his own body from a distance—illustrates the derangement of

perception in an environment where visual technology is distorting not only the *flesh event*, but also, and especially, the space-time of vision where the *opto-electronic interface* and the *sexual encounter* are conjoined to such a degree that Junger might (have said): “The faculty of thinking logically and the sense of gravity seemed to be paralyzed.³⁶

The “body” or “person” the participant of ISS is asked to identify with, ostensibly, has no identity. All *Virtual Sex with...* and *My Plaything...* simulators on the market neglect to identify the male figures of its virtual environments. Representations of male identity are elided entirely from the text and reduce male images to faceless, voiceless ‘fucking’ machines. The woman in the virtual environment appears to be addressing the man within the interface, but in actuality she is directly addressing the participant. She in fact is looking *through* the man she is actually performing on, and must do so to procure the effect of ‘performing’ on the participant, effectively producing an “aesthetics of disappearance,” as Virilio might say; a logic of transparency that is frightening to envision from the perspective of the woman who performs on a man who *isn’t there* while addressing a man she *cannot see*.

John Berger noted a similar phenomenon in some Renaissance paintings: “it is true that sometimes a painting includes a male lover. But the woman’s attention is very rarely directed toward him. Often she looks away from him out of the picture toward the one she considers her true lover—the spectator-owner.”³⁷ Much is typically made of the male position of visual dominance outside of the text, but it seems a bit more needs to be said of, what appears to be, a perpetuating tradition of eliding male identity from sexually codified texts in lieu of addressing his real world counterpart. Contemporary pornography offers countless instances, virtual sexuality being one, where male identity is eschewed in favour of purely phallic representations. The space between phallic displays and the disappearance of male identity in various sexual depictions will require greater critical inquiry if the sex simulator and its eroticization of disappearance and proliferation of modes of self-reflexive vision are any indication of how we perceive “realistic” sexual experiences in the 21st century.

Conclusion

According to Freud, reality may be limited to perceptions that can be verified through words or visual codes. Therefore perceptions are the drive to action that influences, if not controls, real events. Perceptions therefore become the key to reality.³⁸

—Lynn Hershman

It seems to me there is a great confusion between what we understand to be *reality* and what we understand to be *actuality*. Despite imbrications at some level, each is quite distinct in what it designates. The three “*selves*” identified in ISSs can be said to belong to the order of *reality* as the states of consciousness described attest to, but only one, the first *self*, properly belongs to the order of *actuality*. The fact that something is *really* occurring does not necessarily mean that it is *actually* occurring. As far

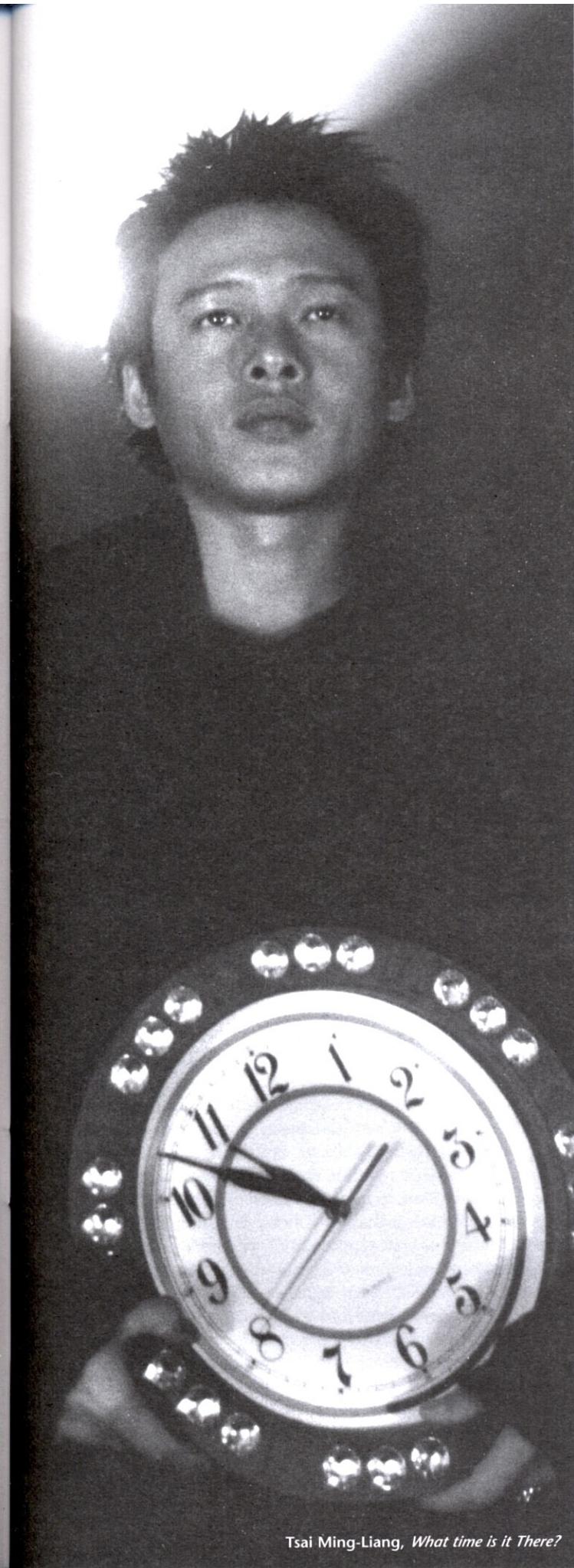
as aesthetic representations go, the power of an imaginary interference may temporarily mask this fact, but is unable to sustain the illusion over protracted periods of time. ISSs elicit an imaginary response from the participant who seeks to briefly blur these distinctions while interacting with his telesexual fantasy. It is of paramount importance to recall that, despite semantic differences, *reality* and *actuality* are perceived with the same perceptual machinery and as the participant of the ISS uses his imagination to oscillate between these registers the potential for an imaginary residue staining his perception of *actuality* remains a possibility. If we factor in the pedagogical capabilities of the simulator form we are led to conclude (and compelled to reiterate) that in spite of an inability to sustain a blurred demarcation between *reality* and *actuality* outside of virtuality, one may respond at some level of consciousness to *actual* stimuli as they might *real* stimuli (Homology Hypothesis).

The spectatorial experience of "interactive" sexuality in cyberspace presents palpable consequences to the participant's *actual* experience of sexual interaction by divesting it of intersubjective tactility and elevating an onanistic imaginary to the level of ultra-realism, and so an end to the resistance of physical contact, an end to the seduction of sexuality and to the gestures and expressions of desiring bodies—and as Chris Marker noted "... if the desiring body ceases to exist for the Other, then what remains is a wound, disembodied;" an unwitting prediction of the fate of sexual bodies in cyberspace. Marker's "wound" signifies the absence of an actual Other for whom one is desirable and virtual sexuality does the job of inflicting this wound, then cauterizing it in the glow of the interface.

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Notes

- 1 Virilio, Paul. *Open Sky*. London: Verso, 1997. p. 104
- 2 Williams, Linda. *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure and the "Frenzy of the Visible."* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989. p. 306.
- 3 What is meant here by "active look" is a participatory mode of vision where looking and acting are conjoined contra the classical model of moving-image spectatorship and its looking/passivity dichotomy. Here what the viewer sees relies entirely on the (inter)action he wishes to take. The term "solicited gaze" should be understood as the explicit appeal of the spectacle for the viewer to marry his vision with the vision of his avatar through an interplay of spatial strategies of approximation and proximity.
- 4 See Michael Heim's *The Cyberspace Dialectic*.
- 5 Hershman, Lynn. "The Fantasy Beyond Control." *The New Media Reader*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003. p. 646
- 6 Williams, *Hard Core*. p.39
- 7 Ibid
- 8 Ibid
- 9 Walter Benjamin's term borrowed from his watershed essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*.
- 10 Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. New York: Penguin Books, 1977. p. 60
- 11 Writing in 1990, Hershman perspicuously noted that, "Creating a truly interactive work demands that it exist on a mass scale, available and accessible to many people." A decade later, ISS's would bring her vision to fruition.
- 12 Williams, *Hard Core*. p. 312
- 13 In both series of ISS the "money" shots are simulated. This presents a strange twist to Williams' assertion that the money shot "is the ultimate guarantor of visual pleasure." With virtual sex we find a subversion of this staple principle in porn theory: *the counterfeit money shot*. The come shot is no longer the verifiable measuring stick of externalized sexual pleasure - here many of the come shots are reproduced. All that is necessary now is a simulated approximation of the original expulsion of fluids.
- 14 We do not discount the possibility of female or transgender viewers of ISS (the latter offering an interesting conundrum in the context of this discussion), but questions regarding these spectatorial looks are beyond the parameters of this paper.
- 15 Deleuze's term used to describe, for example, the "disconnected" or "empty" spaces of postwar Europe and postwar European cinema.
- 16 Hansen, Mark B. N. *New Philosophy for New Media*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2004. p. 204.
- 17 The question raised here involves the roles played by *sense-memory* and *sense-data*, where the memories of the participant's *actual* experience of the space of the virtual environment and the sum of his intersubjective sexual encounters coalesce.
- 18 Hansen, *New Philosophy for New Media*. p. 204
- 19 The objects constituting the spaces of the *My Plaything...* series, though somewhat resonant in their significations (ex. ruler + chalkboard + desk with an apple on it =[signifies] school) are unable to signify on equal ground with the spectacle of sexuality it backdrops. Our earlier invocation of Deleuze's 'any-space-whatever' lends credence to this hypothesis.
- 20 Rolfe, J.M, K.J Staples, eds. *Flight Simulation*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1986. p. 3
- 21 In flight simulation, for example, one might appropriate our use of *types* and *subsets* to refer to 'Landing' (*Type*) and subsequently 'In the Dark,' 'In the Rain.' etc. (*Subsets*).
- 22 Burns, Ryan Joseph. *Male Internet Pornography Consumers and Their Attitudes Toward Men and Women*. University of Oklahoma (Ph.D dissertation), 2001. (Based on an article by: Barry Brummett. "The Homology Hypothesis: "Pornography on the VCR," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 5 (1988): 202-216.)
- 23 Quote taken from the back cover of the DVD for Digital Sin's *My Plaything: Gauge* (2001).
- 24 Tart, Charles T. *States of Consciousness*. New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1975. p. 95
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Virtual Reality and Augmented Reality applications would be better suited to the task of creating immersive environments than a simulator.
- 27 Williams, *Hard Core*. p. 307
- 28 Sartre, Jean-Paul. *The Imaginary*. London: Routledge, 2004 (1940).
- 29 Quote taken from online encyclopedia:
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Proprioception>
- 30 We acknowledge a third dimension to proprioception that suggests the brain is hardwired with a preexisting "neuromatrix," or map of the body in which "second nature" is assumed *a priori*. Intercourse may very well belong to this "neuromatrix," but we believe it is outside the parameters of this study.
- 31 Virilio. *Open Sky*. p. 66
- 32 Williams, *Hard Core*. p. 312
- 33 Taken from a lucid dreamer's journal entry entitled "Perfect Nothingness" posted here:
http://www.ramalila.net/Adventures/Dreamers/gv_perfect.htm
- 34 Italics mine.
- 35 Linda Williams describes a *corporealized observer* as, "the body of the observer becom[ing] the body observed." Quote taken from her essay *Corporealized Observers: Visual Pornographies and the "Carnal Density of Vision."* P. 37.
- 36 Virilio, Paul. *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception*. London: Verso, 1989. A paragraph cited from p. 81.
- 37 Berger, p. 56.
- 38 Hershman, *The Fantasy Beyond Control*. p. 647



Tsai Ming-Liang, *What time is it There?*

Saving the Image

SCALE AND DURATION IN
CONTEMPORARY ART CINEMA

ERIKA BALSOM

About halfway through Frank Tashlin's 1957 film, *Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?*, the title character, played by Tony Randall, stops the action of the film to sarcastically comment on the virtues of television. The widescreen, Technicolor image shrinks to the size and aspect ratio of a television set and falls prey to the snowy interference of the medium during its early days. Randall asserts that, "This break in our motion picture is made out of respect for the TV fans in our audience who are accustomed to constant interruptions for messages from sponsors. We want all you TV fans to feel at home and not forget the thrill you get watching television on your big twenty-one inch screens." As Randall speaks, the shrunken frame of this "televisual" image cuts off his head and later fades in and out of a clear picture. Tashlin's anti-illusionist gesture makes explicit the anxiety underlying the invention of the widescreen process of CinemaScope, which attempted to win the ongoing contest with television through a triumph of scale. CinemaScope's introduction in 1953 recast the pleasure of cinema as a delight in being dwarfed by the image onscreen, in cowering beneath its giganticism, of experiencing the world, as the Nicholas Ray film would have it, "bigger than life." This importance of the issue of scale has anything but diminished in recent years, as films are now seen more and more seen on tiny, portable screens by a mobile spectator. Tony Randall's indictment of television stands as even truer now, in the age of the video iPod. However, it is difficult to identify any technological development akin to CinemaScope in today's horizontally integrated film industry, as the major studios rely progressively more on DVD sales and tie-ins to ensure a hefty return on their investments, increasingly resigned to the fact that their revenue will come from venues other than theatrical exhibition. Audiences might be lured back to theatres by the promise of a special effects spectacle that must absolutely be seen at the cinema, but it seems safe to say that the ritual of moviegoing has been significantly altered: stripped of its monumentality and place in the public sphere, the big screen now most often appears small scale, in a domestic setting, even if televisions become larger and flatter all the time. This reduction of scale is accompanied by a freedom from the imposition of time felt in the cinema. No longer a party of an unspoken contract to sit and endure until the end, the home viewer does not experience the

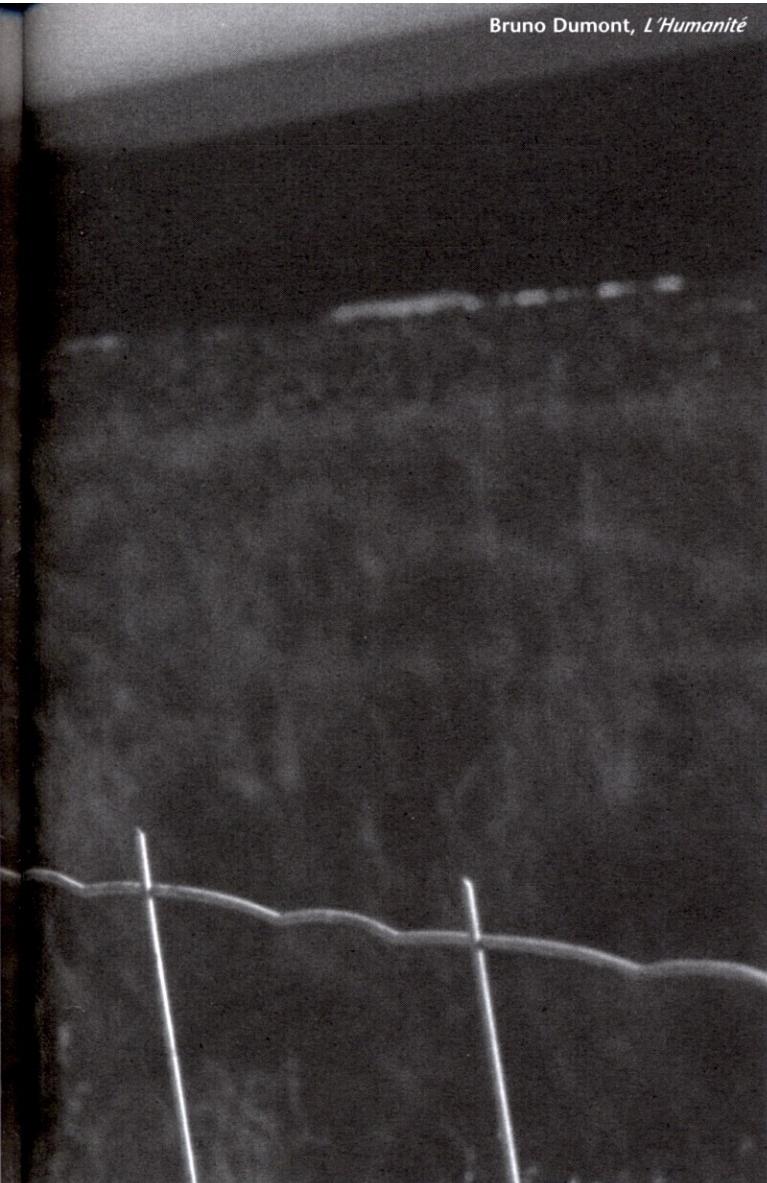


same constraints as the filmgoer, always free to pause, rewind, or break for a snack.

It does seem, though, possible to identify a strain of recent art film that insists on the scale and duration of the traditional viewing situation of cinema, that refuses to be miniaturized. In an ever-accelerating image-based culture, this cinema emerges as a contestation of the frenetic montage aesthetics of contemporary media, mounting a significant challenge to the long-held conception of cinema as a province of shock and distraction. Through the employment of a long take style, it refigures the medium as one of intense contemplative possibility. Reaching across the globe, this tendency encompasses much of the most exciting cinema being produced today: Tsai Ming-Liang and Hou Hsiao-Hsien in Taiwan, Jia Zhang-ke in China, the Dardennes in Belgium, Bruno Dumont in France, Apichatpong Weerasethakul in Thailand, Bela Tarr in Hungary, Pedro Costa in Portugal, and Gus Van Sant in America, to name only a few. Certainly, these films are shown on DVDs in domestic settings, but there is a sense that they are all, in their own ways, essentially *about* the very things small scale domestic viewing neglects: the relationship between the spectator, temporality, and the grandeur of the screen. These films insist on this situation to achieve their full effect.

Raymond Bellour has advanced the somewhat elusive con-

cept of "saving the image," an operation that might most productively be thought of as an attempt to redeem or rescue the image from the vulgarization and profanation it has undergone in the era of mass media proliferation. Curiously, Bellour—a theorist who, of course, made his name on microanalyses of Hawks and Hitchcock—here moves beyond the cinema, designating this imperative to the realm of video and installation. The artists he discusses, such as Bill Viola and Chantal Akerman, have important links to the cinematic if not the cinema proper. However, for Bellour, the image is saved through occupying an intermedial position; he describes it as "the fiction of a cinema saving itself as much as escaping itself, thanks to the metamorphoses to which it is submitted."¹ Cinema is able to pursue its goals only through a transubstantiation, as its supposed "death" and loss of cultural dominance forces it to submit to gallery art as the space in which to articulate the medium's possibilities. Is, then, the gallery the location which can now most fully realize the lost potential of the cinema? Do the areas of video and installation emerge as the primary articulations of the cinematic, even though they exist outside of what has traditionally been designated as cinema? Bellour seems to suggest that the domain of cinema proper is now beyond hope, lost forever to the lightweight spectacle of Hollywood's media-industrial complex. He writes, "And it is in



pushing the image beyond what it was thought it could or should be that it is once again and always an attempt to save the image, or at least something of the image and the world of which the image claims to be a sublimated presentation, when quite clearly it is no more than its inconstant mirror and its sickly skin.”² While certainly a large proportion of the current cinema participates in the lamented profanation of the image rather than taking a critical stance against it, it is surely possible to identify positions within contemporary narrative cinema that participate in what might be termed a “saving” of the image, that stay within the realm of cinema while still pushing the film image to its limits, to an interrogation of its status in a world marked by the ubiquity of the media. This paper will examine the return to questions of scale and duration in contemporary art cinema as engaging in such a project, placing the work of filmmakers as diverse as Bruno Dumont, Bela Tarr, and Tsai Ming-Liang together to demonstrate how, despite all of their apparent differences, one may see the emergence of a general tendency of insisting on the traditional architectural viewing situation of cinema, the giganticism of its screen, and its command over time. In choosing to elaborate a concept through the selection of exemplary practitioners, this discussion will emulate Bellour’s structure while arguing against his implicit presumptions.

1. The face of Bruno Dumont

Bruno Dumont’s 1999 film, *L’Humanité*, confronts its spectators with the banality of rural life, but does so in such a way so as, to paraphrase the Bazinian proposition, to strip it of all the dirt and grime with which our eyes had covered it.³ Mundanities appear in a stark freshness that neither aestheticizes nor degrades, but rather directs the spectator’s attention towards those small details most often ignored. Near the opening of *L’Humanité*, the spectator is confronted with a gruesome and unflinching view of a dead girl’s naked torso lying in a field, but the film is only peripatetically concerned with the unravelling of this mystery. More than any hermeneutic puzzle, *L’Humanité* employs a penetrating stare that seeks to probe the nuances of grief and longing as they are registered on the human face. Very much an inheritor of Bresson’s treatment of his actors as “models,” the figures of Dumont’s film are submitted to an almost violent reduction, an exhausting emptying of interiority. In the opening sequence of the film, we see Pharaon de Winter (played by the non-professional Emmanuel Schotté, who won the best actor award at the Cannes film festival for this performance), a police lieutenant, as he walks through open fields, only to stumble and fall face down in the mud. Here, Dumont goes in for a close-up of Pharaon’s face, lasting sixteen seconds. For roughly the first two-thirds of the shot, he remains completely immobile. Even his eyes remain unblinking, disconcertingly fixed on something offscreen left. The only movement present in the shot comes from the wind rustling his hair; on the soundtrack we hear his deliberate breathing mixed with the airy breeze. When Pharaon finally does move, it is to look back to his car, where he has heard the beeping alarm that will summon him to the discovery of the girl’s brutalized body. This early shot establishes what is perhaps Dumont’s primary strategy throughout the film: in opposition to the Hollywoodian face, communicative of an interior, both emotive and readable, Dumont brings his viewer Pharaon’s blank visage—an inscrutable, glacial exterior upon which we will see the horrors of the world reflected.

It might be proposed that the dominant style of filmmaking inherited from the nineteenth century realist novel rests on the advancement of details in the service of narrative. A cut away to a close-up of a doorknob, for example, will always result in the doorknob’s turning, in an effort to create suspense as to who might be walking into the room.⁴ Films such as Dumont’s, however, rest as much on detail, but of a very different variety. Instead of a detective story involving the gathering of clues, the details of *L’Humanité* are the almost imperceptible, unconscious motions of the face in close-up. A blink, a breath, a twitch: these are the film’s events. When these moments become the central preoccupation of a film, how are they impacted when the image is reduced in scale? What is it about this particular brand of filmmaking that forces it to rely so heavily on the grandeur of the image and the immobilization of the spectator?

It is often casually remarked that seeing a film on a small screen differs greatly from seeing it in the cinema, but it is difficult to discern exactly what the change entails and how it might be generalizable into a theory of film spectatorship, something which perhaps accounts for the dearth of consideration given to the implications of cinematic scale throughout the history of film theory. It should be emphasized that “cinematic scale” may be deployed in two senses: the size of the image itself and the rela-



tive proximity or distance from which the image is captured. Even the term "close up" in English collapses the distinction to be made in French between the *plan rapproché* and the *gros plan*, that is, between the shot taken from a great proximity, and the image projected at a large scale. One has the sense that television and the internet will never bring us close-ups as the cinema has: they may disseminate an image filmed proximately, but they will always lack the grandeur of cinematic scale. Eisenstein wrote that, "[T]he laws of cinematographic perspective are such that a cockroach filmed in close-up appears as fearsome on the screen as a hundred elephants in long shot."⁵ The impact of such a close-up is contingent on the peculiar combination of the *gros plan* and the *plan rapproché*, one half of which is inevitably lost outside of the traditional viewing situation of cinema. The shot described above is indeed a face filmed proximately, but it also a face that must be projected at large scale in order to achieve its true impact. The darkened theatre strips the spectator of possible distraction and avoidance. Surely, he or she is nevertheless free to look away, but where? Into the void of darkness that surrounds the bright screen? In a domestic setting, Pharaoh's face would be

a part of a piece of furniture, perhaps next to a fireplace or bookshelf, competing for the spectator's attention. Dumont's film is about *not looking away*, as it commands the spectator's submission to making his or her look as unflinching and attentive as the camera's. The largeness of the image can heighten attention to detail, but can also function as an imposition—on both the spectator's sense of time and of his or her ability to look—of a sort of distilled intensity that is paradoxically overwhelming and moving through its *froideur* and refusal of sentiment.

In his book on the face in cinema, Jacques Aumont sees film as being perhaps the largest denigrator of the face, as an agent of emptying and of petrifaction, but also as a privileged site for its redemption. He writes, "In the end, it's because of having pressed the face so much, like an old lemon with no juice left, in terms of expression, truth, or whatever—that cinema produced it as definitively empty, empty of interiority, empty of expression, empty of face-ness."⁶ The face of the star takes on a function analogous to the commodity in capitalist modernity, as one is exchangeable against any other, robbed of singularity. If this statement is to characterize the dominant role of the face in cin-



ema, inherited by it from a certain tradition of portrait painting, Aumont nevertheless specifies a terrain of intervention: the submission of the face to a temporality that would purge it of any association with communication or event. Just as cinema was once decried as being

one of the supreme portents of the shock experience of modern life, but it is now reclaimed as a province of contemplation, the face too is recuperated for close consideration. Here, the face would convey nothing, but would rather be the undoing of the notion of the face as locus of interiority, as it is instead seen for itself, for better or worse, as unmasterable. This mode is designated by Aumont as the contemplative, in opposition to the mode of the event.⁷ Dumont's sustained stare at the face in close-up marries scale with duration to achieve a powerful style that facilitates such contemplation. His concentration on the face of Pharaon is unrelenting and yet he refuses to supply the spectator with much more than a glimpse into either Pharaon's past or his inner life. This refusal of interiority might be construed as

anti-humanist, but in a cultural climate that manufactures sentiment through the carefully crafted and unabashed soliciting of emotion of Hollywood film, Dumont probes for something that is at once on the surface and yet so much deeper. To the hollowed out shell of the commodified image, it restores something of the faith a filmmaker like Bresson once held in the cinema's ability to think complex concepts like guilt, redemption, and forgiveness.

2. The time of Bela Tarr

The recent work of Hungarian filmmaker Bela Tarr pushes duration to an extent most often confined to the experimental tradition, as may be seen in the work of Andy Warhol or James Benning. Employing almost exclusively extremely long takes—his two and a half hour film *Werckmeister Harmonies* consists of only thirty-nine shots with an average shot length of three minutes, fifty-five seconds—Tarr's films allow for a sustained concentration of minute details often overlooked. The attention Dumont brings to the human face is here expanded to regard figures, landscapes, architecture. With a roaming camera and brilliantly con-

structed sequence shots, Tarr restores something of the quality of long experience or *Erfahrung*—that lost way of inhabiting the world that Walter Benjamin opposed to the shock experience or *Erlebnis* that was so characteristic of modernity.⁸ Instead of quantifying time into abstract units through extensive cutting, here one finds an insistence on continuity that figures the camera as constant observer. Through the extension of time and the deployment of cinematic scale, Tarr engages in a sort of magnification of the world, rendering the miniature gigantic. The long take allows for a plethora of contingent details to enter the scene, which are then amplified by being brought to the spectator in large scale. This might be thought to be what all cinema does, but it would seem that in Tarr's practice, it occupies a more central position. To watch his *Werckmeister Harmonies* is to attend to the minute detail much more than it is to wait for the next plot twist. Indeed, there is a certain purging of the narrative turn from Tarr's films: the spectator is left only with the interstices of events, engaged in probing the last tremors that emanate from something that remains unseen.

The film concerns a Hungarian town in decline, thrown into chaos by the arrival of a mysterious magician called the Prince, who seeming to possess no special powers, exhibits a large, dead whale in a trailer. The spectator who would wait in keen anticipation of the demystification of the Prince's operation, or for any sort of clear narrative explanation or resolution, will find the exercise frustrating and completely in vain. More than any narrative, *Werckmeister Harmonies* is about temporality itself: it is a film that echoes Serge Daney's suggestion that movies are nothing other than "the invention of time."⁹ The opening shot, lasting over nine and a half minutes, establishes the preoccupation with temporality that is so important to the film. It is near closing time at a tavern when the protagonist, János, proposes to demonstrate the workings of the solar eclipse, a lesson that will teach the villagers about immortality by having them step into "the boundlessness, where constancy, quietude, peace, and infinite emptiness reign," as they assume roles as the earth, sun, and moon. János uses the unenergetic men to awkwardly choreograph his drama, his drunken ramblings like so many fables of apocalypse. The eclipse produces an abyssal void (much like a cinematic cut?) in which he is afraid that heaven might fall or the earth might open from below. The men's action stills and there is a palpable *temps mort*. But as the enacted eclipse passes, the earth has "escaped the weight of darkness" and the movement recommences. The take continues and continues, subverting the viewer's expectation of an approaching cut, as the camera winds in and around the figures, framing and re-framing their actions. Suddenly, though, the bar owner commands the men to leave. The camera travels forward with Janos to the door, where he says to the owner, "But Mr. Hagelmayer, it's still not over." Janos's assertion refers equally to the endless of the solar cycle these men are enacting, but equally to the shot, which comes to an end only as he passes into the empty street. This sequence counters the lack of the cut with the plenitude of continuity, nonetheless acknowledging that the shot cannot go on forever. To the immortal endlessness of the universe, Tarr's film opposes the pathos of confronting man's finitude, his entropic decay. The aesthetics of duration works as a formal equivalent of the film's thematic preoccupation with our inability to assert control over time and the necessity of recognizing that a human life is only a

small blip in a much larger continuum.

Tarr has said that he despises stories because they mislead people into believing that something has happened, when in actuality, "In fact, nothing really happens as we flee from one condition to another. Because today there are only states of being—all stories have become obsolete and clichéd, and have resolved themselves. All that remains is time. This is probably the only thing that's still genuine—time itself: the years, days, hours, minutes and seconds."¹⁰ Tarr makes extensive use of the sequence shot to strictly adhere to spatio-temporal continuity in a manner that suggests a Bazinian faith in the image. His minimization of discontinuity combats the segmentation of time into abstract units by insisting on the long *durée* of lived experience. This is an experience, though, that has waned in modernity, with some critics seeing cinema as a primary agent in this process. As suggested above, for Benjamin this is most evident in the preponderance of isolated shock experiences [*Chockerlebnisse*] in the modern metropolis, while Paul Virilio has termed this process "picnolepsy," from the Greek *picnos*, to forget: the condition whereby the subject loses instants in time without being aware of the occurrence.¹¹ Tarr's practice emerges in this context as a sort of restoration of the prelapsarian continuity of time, grounded in the individual's bodily experience more so than in any abstract quantification. As such, the passage of time is intimately aligned with a march towards death, as the human figure becomes a tiny moment in the perpetuity of solar cycles enacted by János and the men in the tavern. Both cinematic scale and extended duration are here in intense dialogue with the frailty of the human body, making it small, even insignificant.

Susan Stewart has written that, "Scale is established by means of a set of correspondences to the familiar."¹² As is the case with duration, any discussion of scale necessarily implies a relation to the body of the viewing subject, which in the case of cinema means the institution of a feeling of smallness in relation to the projected image. The spectator is overtaken by the image, which possesses qualities Stewart attributes to the gigantic: "The gigantic transforms the body into miniature...we are enveloped by the gigantic, surrounded by it, enclosed within its shadow. Whereas we know the miniature as a spatial whole or as temporal parts, we know the gigantic only partially."¹³ There is something overwhelming in the enormity of the cinematic image that cannot be matched by the easily possessed image of the small screen. The extension of time in *Werckmeister Harmonies* is fused to the immobility of the spectator who cowers beneath the gigantic screen. His or her eye scans the immensity of the screen, unable to digest it in a single glance, and equally unable to control the unfolding of time as one would in a home setting.

The particular combination of duration and an insistence on viewing the image large scale that is so central to Tarr's practice also emerges as a central tenant of Susan Sontag's much discussed article, "The Decay of Cinema":

No amount of mourning will revive the vanished rituals—erotic, ruminative—of the darkened theatre. The reduction of cinema to assaultive images, and the unprincipled manipulation of images (faster and faster cutting) to make them more attention-grabbing, has produced a disincarnated, lightweight cinema that doesn't demand anyone's full attention.

Images now appear in any size and on a variety of surfaces: on a screen in a theater, on disco walls and on megascreens hanging above sports arenas. The sheer ubiquity of moving images has steadily undermined the standards people once had both for cinema as art and for cinema as popular entertainment.¹⁴

Many have criticized Sontag's nostalgic and eulogistic tone in this piece, which does seem relatively devoid of hope for the cinema's future. Certainly, Hollywood has attempted to draw audiences back into the theatres through advertising campaigns that insist on the necessity of seeing films such as *The Fantastic Four* on the big screen.¹⁵ But aside from the rise of the blockbuster that perhaps resembles a video game more than it does the classical Hollywood cinema, it is possible to discern a type of filmmaking that reasserts the demand for attention that Sontag saw as lacking. While for critical theorists such as Benjamin and Kracauer, the cinema constituted the modern form of distraction *par excellence*, now the darkened theatre can become a privileged site of contemplation, in which the spectator is forced to give him or herself over to the time of the film and stay immobile for its duration, experiencing the heavy weight of time's passing. Tarr's cinema is anything but "disincarnated" and "light-weight": it acts on the body of the spectator as it oppressively imposes its own temporality and looms large over him or her in the darkened theatre.

3. The death of cinema according to Tsai Ming-Liang

Tsai Ming-Liang's films are, for many, slow to the point of tedium. In works such as *What Time is it There?* (2001) and *The Hole* (1998), Tsai has developed a long-take style that inherits the Taiwanese penchant for duration familiar from the films of Hou Hsiao-Hsien. His 2003 film, *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* expands these considerations to meditate on the death of cinema even as it testifies to the standing vibrancy of the medium. Certainly, the medium has died many deaths throughout its short history: even Godard's 1967 *Week-end* ends with the title cards "Fin d'histoire/fin du cinéma." Cinema is the quintessentially modern medium; as such, perhaps the continual pronouncement of its death sentences is somehow linked to the modern obsession with the production of incessant novelty. Nevertheless, it seems that the present moment presents a particularly grave situation for cinema as it has been known: both the material substrate of celluloid and the traditional exhibition situation are in serious jeopardy and most critics would seem to agree that our culture is now increasingly governed by the logic of internet and of the personal wireless device rather than the old grandfather of the cinema.

Goodbye, Dragon Inn confronts this issue directly: consisting of many static long takes that at moments become indiscernible from still images, it follows the last screening at a Taipei cinema before it closes for good. The film shown is King Hu's 1966 kung fu epic, *Dragon Inn*, and the actors of this classic film are present for its last glory, watching their younger selves on the flickering screen. More than perhaps any other film, *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* makes explicit the link between a death of cinema as it has been and an insistence on duration while extending to consider, in a more general sense, the link between death and time. Cinema, the preservatory technology said to conquer finitude, is here

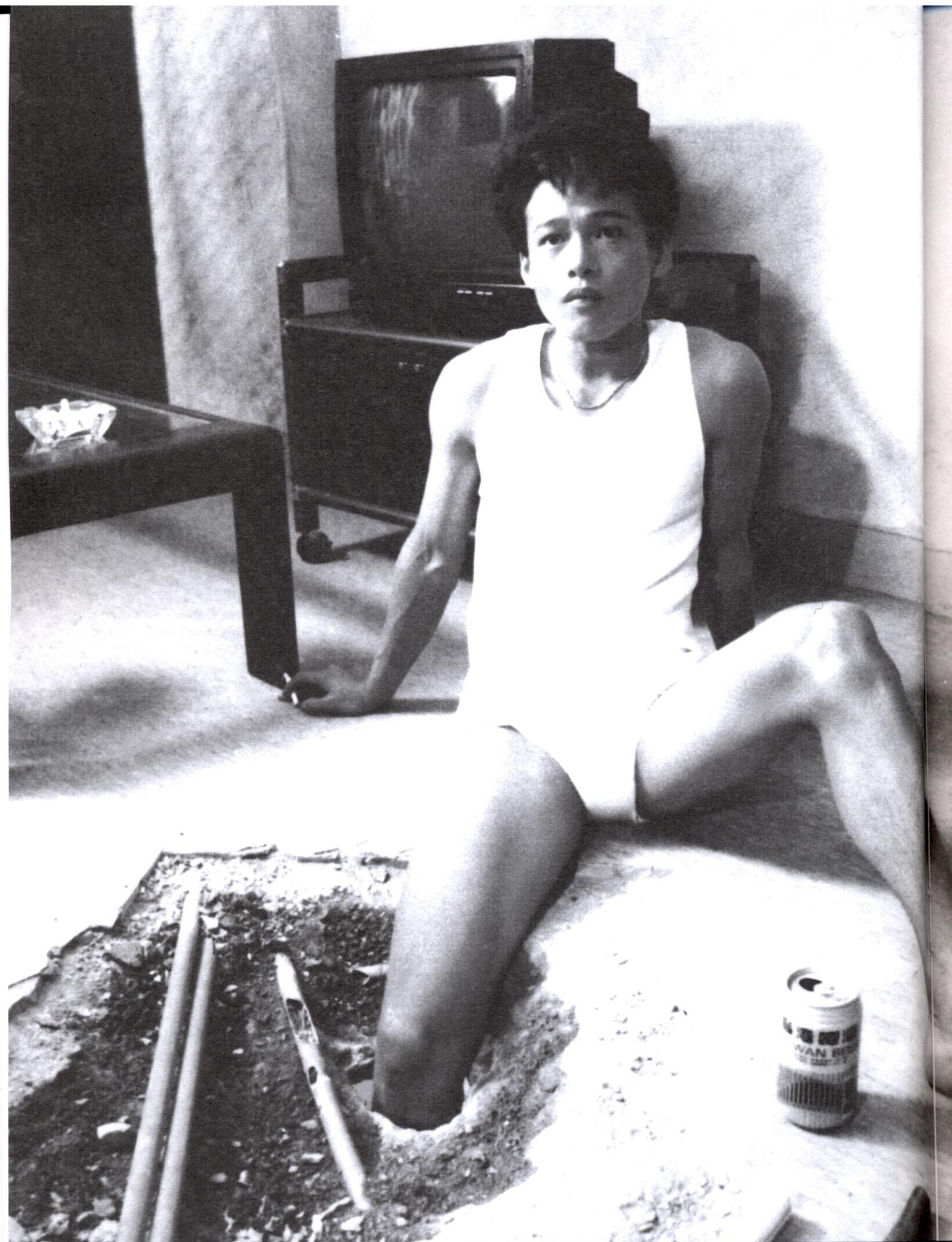
engaged in its own struggles against the accelerating temporality of the frenetic montage that characterizes contemporary mass culture. The film is a meditation on the entropic melancholy of aging, bringing us characters, rooms, and objects that have all seen better days. The actors of *Dragon Inn* literally see this lost past replay before them onscreen, casting into relief the inextricable relation between the cinema and death.

The frequent use of extreme long takes, familiar from Tarr's films, here takes on a significantly different character as their unwaveringly fixed frame contributes to an aesthetics of boredom. Tarr's roving camera prowled through the world on a quest of discovery; Tsai's fixed frame denies the casual glance of the television in favour of a penetrating stare. Time weighs heavily in *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*, dragging at a snail's pace toward stasis. Tsai also highlights the inherent spectrality of the film medium, as the stars of the 1966 film watch themselves some 37 years later. The cinema is attributed something of the uncanny, as it is aligned with an unnatural revivification of the lost past. One of the very few lines of dialogue within the film asserts that the cinema is haunted, but Tsai goes further, additionally figuring the institution of cinema itself as a ghost of its former self. The theatre is decrepit; its last screening is attended by only a few. In one sense, the film is a eulogy of the joys of cinemagoing, a paean to a lost era with little hope for the future. The film asserts that despite the cinema's promise to defeat the indefatigable forward march of time, it too exists in a slavish dependence on it. Like the aged actors observing themselves onscreen, *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* is representative of an exhausted and elderly cinema, reflecting on brighter times. But in another sense, the film is engaged in a project of asserting the continued importance of the traditional architectural situation of cinema, of arguing for the necessity of such an art exactly because it has become slightly out of date. The film does not merely take the traditional exhibition situation as its thematic subject, but rather employs formal and (anti)narrative strategies that depend crucially upon it. Thus, it suggests that while a particular kind of cinema may be lost to us forever, this does not foreclose numerous avenues of exploration for the future. Relative obsolescence can be a liberating thing, providing cinema with a radically changed cultural status and, as such, a different locus from which to engage with the world.

The metamorphoses undergone by the cinema in the century since its birth have been great and unrelenting, and show no signs of ceasing. It has been decades since Roland Barthes lamented the decline of the movie theatre:

In this darkness of the cinema (anonymous, populated, numerous—oh, the boredom, the frustration of so-called private showings!) lies the very fascination of the film (any film). Think of the contrary experience: on television, where films are also shown, no fascination; here darkness is erased, anonymity repressed; space is familiar, articulated (by furniture, known objects), tamed...the eroticisation of the place is foreclosed...¹⁶

This eloquent account of the spectator's encounter with the cinema vocalizes a fear of its loss at the hands of television, while celebrating the very particular characteristics of cinematic spectatorship. More than the images the spectator sees on the screen,



the experience of the dark room, where the immobile viewer is paradoxically alone in a crowd, contributes to the specificity of the medium. Now, almost thirty years later, when cinema is threatened once more, this time by the development of digital technologies, critics everywhere decry the death of cinema.

However, this emphasis on cinematic scale and exhibition practice stands in sharp contradistinction to many discussions of medium change in film studies today. The increasing obsolescence of celluloid has prompted a return to questions of film's referentiality, often setting the indexicality of the analogue against the ontological uncertainty and groundlessness of the digital. Questions of cinematic scale pose the problem in a different register, necessarily supplementing such discussions with considerations of exhibition practice. Stepping outside of the "semiotic conundrum" of indexicality—to use Thomas Elsaesser's phrase—it instead shifts emphasis to consider how cinema changes when it is increasingly viewed on laptop screens, televisions, iPods, and airplanes.¹⁷ Indeed, Elsaesser is one of the few critics who have seized on the practice of cinemagoing *as event*. Unlike many, he insists that the digital not be defined technologically, but rather as a discursive formation with varying social and economic effects. This essay has attempted to take up this call, temporarily bracketing the question of analogue versus digital to engage instead in probing the ramifications of large versus small, public versus private.

There is a sense in which the loss of cultural dominance felt by cinema in recent decades is perhaps a blessing in disguise: Serge Daney has written, "Defunct as an industry, cinema will once more become an artisanal art, poor or affluent, and will talk of everything that remains in frame once the compressing rollers of mediated communication have gone by."¹⁸ This position stands in sharp distinction to Bellour, who appears to have relinquished any hope that the cinema might have something valuable offer in the contemporary moment. In choosing to assign the task of "saving the image" exclusively to the realm of "cinematic" gallery art, Bellour overlooks important trends in contemporary cinema and seems to be joining in the morose chorus of those who would sound the death knell of cinema. Instead of figuring the moment of crucial metamorphosis as taking place when the cinema extends beyond itself, as Bellour does, perhaps it is more productive to see the metamorphosis as existing too within cinema proper. Not as a death or an end, but rather as clearing a space for a new cinema from within, testifying to the sustained relevance of the medium.

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Notes

- 1 Raymond Bellour, "Saving the Image," *Saving the Image: Art After Film*, eds. T. Leighton and P. Buchler (Glasgow: Centre for Contemporary Arts, 2003) p. 70
- 2 Ibid., 59
- 3 "Only the impassive lens, stripping its object of all those ways of seeing it, those piled-up preconceptions, that spiritual dust and grime with which my eyes have covered it, is able to present it in all its virginal purity to my attention and consequently to my love." André Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," *What Is Cinema? Volume 1*, trans. and ed. H. Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), p. 15
- 4 For a discussion of the "door knob style" of suspense, see: André Bazin, "An Aesthetic of Reality: Neorealism," *What is Cinema? Volume 2*, trans. H. Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), p. 28
- 5 Sergei Eisenstein, *Au delà des étoiles (Oeuvres, tome 1)*, (Paris: U.G.E., 1974), p. 229; quoted in: Pascal Bonitzer, "Here: The Notion of the Shot and the Subject of Cinema," trans. B. Krohn, *Film Reader* 4 eds. Blaine Allan, Valentin Almendarez, and William Lafferty, (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University, 1979), p. 113
- 6 Jacques Aumont, *Du Visage au cinéma* (Paris: Editions de l'Etoile/Cahiers du cinéma, 1992), p. 183; translation mine.
- 7 Ibid., pp. 161-162
- 8 See: Walter Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," *Selected Writings, Volume 4, 1938-1940*, eds. H. Eiland and M.W. Jennings (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), pp. 315-316 especially.
- 9 Serge Daney, *Cinema in Transit*, trans. Liz Heron; unpublished manuscript, p. 107
- 10 Bela Tarr, "Why I Make Films," trans. Kati Baranyi, Peter Doherty, Laszlo Jeles Nemes, and Daniel Nashat, *Bela Tarr: A Cinema of Patience* (Chicago: Facets Video, February 2006). Reprinted from *Bela Tarr*, (Budapest: Mokep Co., 2004).
- 11 Paul Virilio, *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*, trans. P. Beitchmann (New York: Semiotext(e), 1991), pp.9-10
- 12 Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993) p. 46
- 13 Ibid., p. 71
- 14 Susan Sontag. "The Decay of Cinema," *New York Times Magazine* (February 25, 1999). Available on-line: <http://www.nytimes.com/books/00/03/12/specials/sontag-cinema.html>
- 15 Indeed, in the summer of 2005, *The Fantastic Four* was featured in an advertisement played before features that attempted to discourage film piracy by insisting on the necessity of seeing the film in the cinema.
- 16 Roland Barthes. "Leaving the Movie Theatre," *The Rustle of Language*, trans. R Howard (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd), p. 346
- 17 Thomas Elsaesser, "Digital Cinema: Delivery, Event, Time," *Cain, Abel, or Cable? The Screen Arts in the Digital Age*, eds. T. Elsaesser and K. Hoffmann (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1998), p. 203.
- 18 Serge Daney, *Le Salaire du zappeur* (Paris: Editions Ramsay, 1988), p. 251; translation mine.

Singing Outside the Frame

THE FEMALE VOICE-OFF IN *GIGI* (MINNELLI, 1958)

SUSAN SMITH

Because of the deviation it offers from the standard rule of synchronization and the opportunity it affords for considering how cinema has made use of its off-screen space, the voice-off (along with the voice-over) tended to figure quite prominently in the theoretical work that was carried out during the 1980s on the voice in film. Yet an examination of the kind of roles ascribed to such a device (which basically involves the source of a diegetic voice being located off-screen at the point of utterance) reveals some of the disagreements and polemical tendencies characterising voice-related writing of that period. Michel Chion's book *The Voice in Cinema*¹ is centrally oriented around an exploration of the unsettling effects that can be achieved by the voice-off (the seemingly ubiquitous, omniscient power of which depends crucially, he argues, on its source remaining unseen) and he employs the term *acousmetre* to refer to that "special being, a kind of talking and acting shadow"² whose voice is heard but whose face and physical presence is kept mysteriously and (usually) menacingly outside of the frame. In contrast, Mary Ann Doane³ and Kaja Silverman⁴ concentrate on the voice-off's tendency to perform a more ideologically reassuring role, arguing that, through its ability (in Silverman's words) to "extend[s] the boundaries of the fiction beyond what can be seen to what can be heard"⁵ it has traditionally acted as a way of defusing and stabilising the threatening heterogeneity of the off-screen space and of reinforcing the illusory unity of the diegetic world and classic text as a whole.

In construing its traditional role in terms of containment, Doane regards the voice-off's position within the diegesis a key determining factor. Drawing (as Silverman does) on Pascal Bonitzer's work on *film noir*, she thus claims that: "The voice-off is always [citing Bonitzer's phrase] "submitted to the destiny of the body" because it *belongs* to a character who is confined to the space of the diegesis, if not to the visible space of the screen."⁶ Then, in a manner that sharply contrasts with what Chion argues are the unsettling effects that can arise from the knowledge that the source of the voice may at any moment reveal itself within the film frame, Doane attributes a much more comforting effect to the voice-off: "Its efficacy rests on the knowl-

edge that the character can easily be made visible by a slight reframing which would reunite the voice and its source."⁷ While both Doane and Silverman stress the importance of synchronization as the ultimate means of containing any more threatening potential to the voice-off (something that Chion, from his own very different vantage-point, also makes clear), Silverman goes much further in contending that in classic cinema it is the female who is usually subjected most severely to this process. This is something that she finds evidenced not just in the greater pressure to reunite the disembodied female voice with its bodily source but in the extreme rarity with which female, as opposed to male, characters are accorded the privilege of the voice-off in the first place. According to Silverman, it is the onus that mainstream cinema places on the woman to display, in displaced form, the male subject's own sense of lack, that leads to her being located firmly instead on the side of visibility:

The male subject is protected from unpleasurable self-knowledge through a fictional redrawing of the diegetic boundaries, a redrawing which situates him in a position of apparent proximity to the cinematic apparatus, while firmly reiterating the isolation of the female voice from all productivity. This opposition expresses itself through the close identification of the female voice with spectacle and the body, and a certain aspiration of the male voice to invisibility and anonymity. At its most crudely dichotomous, Hollywood pits the disembodied male voice against the synchronized female voice.⁸

By way of suggesting some of the challenges that can be posed to work of this nature and the benefits that may arise from considering the voice outside of the framework of 1980s high theory, I have chosen to focus in this article on one intriguing instance of where a film—the Hollywood musical *Gigi*—does in fact grant the woman the role of voice-off (on this occasion in a singing not speaking capacity) and in a way that, by never revealing the character it relates to at any point in the narrative, seems very much intent on refusing this pressure to re-anchor the woman's voice to her body. In resisting the pressure of synchronization, this singing voice-off also manages to assert itself in a manner that remains noticeably free from the kind of menacing

Louis Jourdan, Leslie Caron and Maurice Chevalier, *Gigi*



properties that Chion finds in the acousmatic voice in cinema, the comedic spirit it exudes instead enabling it to give voice to the film's feminist concerns in its own highly distinctive way.

The voice in question is that of Gigi/Leslie Caron's mother who, in Colette's original short story, is given both a name (Andrée Alvar) and, despite her busy career at the opera, a fairly prominent speaking part at certain points in the dialogue (especially with her mother, Mamita). In the film, however, the director Vincente Minnelli chose to cut this character role right down so that Gigi's mother functions purely as an off-screen singing voice that can be heard emanating from one of the adjacent rooms in Mamita/Hermione Gingold's apartment on three occasions in the narrative. Commenting on this decision in his autobiography, Minnelli cites as a motivating factor his experience of watching an unsatisfactory non-musical Broadway stage adaptation of the story which he claims over-emphasised the part of Gigi's mother at the expense of the female protagonist herself.⁹ Arguing that: "Since she [Andrée] had forfeited the upbringing of Gigi to Madame Alvarez [aka Mamita], her mother, bringing her into the film in any concrete way could detract from the main story line"¹⁰, he states that there were two main advantages to cutting her role right down in this way—namely that: "Her off-stage presence could be used for comic effect" and "The loving relationship between the old woman and the young girl could be more clearly developed."¹¹

As an explanation of his rationale for making such a change, Minnelli's comments are interesting for what they reveal about his commitment to bringing out the relationship between Gigi and her grandmother more fully, a crucial aspect of the film that we will be exploring later. However, in construing his decision purely in terms of the need not to detract from this central relationship, he puts forward his case in a manner that tends to obscure some of the more productively creative connections and meanings that (perhaps buried away in his brief reference to its "comic effect") can be understood as arising from his deployment of this off-screen vocal device. By way of demonstrating this, we shall begin by examining the initial occasion where it is used. This arises near the start of the film during the scene where Gigi returns home from school to her grandmother's apartment having forgotten to make her weekly visit to her Aunt Alicia/Isabel Jeans. On being reminded of this by Mamita who then tells her granddaughter to tidy herself up by putting on her coat and combing her hair, the following exchange takes place between them during which Gigi's mother's singing voice can be heard for the first time.

Gigi: Oh, I hate this coat. It makes my legs feel so long.

Mamita: Yes, your legs are long. You know, sometimes I'm sorry you never learned to dance.

Gigi: Oh, but I want to Grandmama! Why don't you let me take lessons?

Mamita: Oh no. Not the same mistake twice. I allowed your mother to take singing lessons and, phoo, look where she ended up. Slaving away at the Opéra-Comique in ridiculous little roles.

Gigi: She seems happy.

Mamita: Happy! I went to see her one night. I couldn't even find her. In the first act she was behind a tree. In the second act behind a tenor. [On hearing her

daughter's singing strike up towards the end of this sentence, Mamita walks over and closes the door leading into Andrée's room.]

Gigi: Mama's awake. Isn't it early?

Mamita: She's on this afternoon. *If I Were King*. [She then listens to her daughter's singing and, shaking her head, says:] That's more than she does in the whole opera. And when I think of that delightful old gentleman with all those flour mills.

Gigi: Who?

Mamita: Nothing. You go to school every morning. You go to see your Aunt Alicia once a week. That's all the lessons you need. When the time comes, you'll be ready.

Gigi [knowingly]: Ready for what, Grandmama?

Mamita: Now, now run...

Gigi: Goodbye, Grandmama.

Mamita: Goodbye, Gigi. [On hearing her daughter's singing strike up again, she drops her shoulders wearily and glances upwards in disbelief as she makes her way towards the kitchen]

In view of Minnelli's decision to cut down Gigi's mother's role (which he found "so tiresome ... in the Broadway production"¹²) to that of an off-screen singing presence invisible to us, the movie audience, it is tempting to read the film as simply endorsing this reduction of Andrée's professional singing to roles so minor that she can't be seen by the audiences at the Opéra-Comique either. Yet in striking up just as Mamita criticises the insignificant nature of her daughter's "little roles", this singing voice immediately asserts itself in ways that suggest its ability to fulfil a more subversive function within the narrative itself, its piercing, high-pitched nature being the very thing that enables it to cut through the physical barriers of the apartment walls and make its presence felt. The ascending pattern of the singing—as Gigi's mother can be heard practising her scales seven times, on each occasion reaching a higher key as her voice peaks mid-way through—also strongly counters Mamita's negative reading of her daughter's career by conveying a sense of hopeful striving and a determination to succeed. At the same time, there is a wonderful feeling of carefree abandon that comes through in the light, airy, animated pacing and rhythm of the singing, the upbeat nature of which finds its independent corroboration in Gigi's much more positive assessment of her mother's situation: "She seems happy". The fact that Gigi's mother is practising her scales rather than singing a set of lyrics contributes to this sense of joyous abandonment all the more by suggesting a pleasure in the pure act of vocalising itself and a delight in the freedom this grants from the social constraints of language, all of which in turn helps to imply a certain independence of spirit on Andrée's part. This non-verbal form of singing does involve a discipline of its own, of course, as the set structure to the scales and the reiteration of this on seven occasions testify. Yet this is very much outweighed by the sheer exuberance of the voice, the joy and effort that Andrée invests into the routine task of practising her scales suggesting a love of singing for singing's sake that is not catered for by Mamita's tendency to judge her daughter's career solely according to the criteria of professional status and success.

In changing the role of Gigi's mother in this way, Minnelli allows this woman's voice to resist not just the ideological restrictions of the patriarchal world she inhabits but also the kind of authorial interpretation that, in Colette's original short story, tends to construe her character (perhaps like her counterpart in the Broadway production?) as a professionally and emotionally dissatisfied character. "Her [Mamita's] unmarried daughter Andrée, forsaken by Gilberte's [Gigi's] father, now preferred the sober life of a second-lead singer in a State-controlled theatre to the fitful opulence of a life of gallantry" states the author on introducing this character into the story before going on to observe that she "had become prudish too late in life and disgruntled too soon."¹³ There is also a point later on where Andrée herself, returning home late one night from the opera, expresses her frustration at not receiving the professional recognition in the theatre that both she and Mamita believe she deserves: "Oh dear, oh dear, I really don't think I can bear to go on with this sort of life" she confesses to her mother who replies: "It was your own choice. But you would bear it much better ... if you had someone! It's your loneliness that gets on your nerves, and you take such black views. You're behaving contrary to nature."¹⁴

In excluding such references from the screenplay while retaining instead Mamita's wistful line: 'And when I think of that delightful old gentleman with all those flour mills', Minnelli and his screenwriter (and lyricist) Alan Jay Lerner consequently provide the basis for reading Gigi's mother's decision to opt for a life in the opera not as some form of desperate last resort borne out of the experience of romantic rejection and abandonment but as a gesture of defiance motivated by a desire for independence and self fulfilment. This reading is something that is strongly encouraged by the aforementioned vibrant, aspirational qualities of the voice itself and also by Minnelli and Lerner's inclusion of Gigi's comment to the effect that her mother 'seems happy'. It is strengthened even further by their decision to have Gingold's character refer to *If I Were King* as the title of the opera in which Andrée is appearing. In having Mamita speak this additional piece of dialogue (which has no equivalent in Colette's short story) they allow this otherwise so critical maternal figure to allude to the kind of fantasy of power that her daughter gains from singing as the latter aspires not to the courtesan's ambition of receiving expensive jewellery from princes and kings but to usurping the power and status of such men herself.

In allowing Gigi's mother's singing to crop up in this way, Minnelli thus gestures towards the possibility of the female living outside of the narrow choice of gender roles more typically made available to her, the limited nature of which (involving a choice between being a courtesan or married woman) Gigi herself is confronted with during the later stages of the narrative. As a result, Minnelli's approach here is interesting to consider in relation to Doane's argument about mainstream cinema's tendency to use the voice-off to construct a sense of spatial unity. In terms of its relation to literal space, this off-screen female's singing voice on one level seems to conform to this claim: always emanating from a fixed location (namely, that of an adjoining room in the apartment), it can be understood as working to enforce a stable notion of off-screen space, lacking as it does the more disconcerting powers of ubiquity and omniscience that Chion ascribes to the acousmatic voice. Yet the restricted nature of the

space from which this voice-off emerges tends to belie the symbolic effect that it has in gesturing towards the possibility of a wider, more varied form of female experience existing beyond the boundaries of the film frame. As I mentioned earlier, Minnelli's decision not to reveal the owner of the voice either here or at any other point in the narrative also constitutes a refusal of what Silverman regards as mainstream cinema's inevitable association of the woman with visibility. Even more importantly, it manages to do so in a way that seems to be so very deeply tied in with this film's overall commitment to rejecting—as Gigi's mother does through her decision to refuse her destined role of courtesan and pursue a career as a professional singer in the opera instead—the system of values that requires women to be defined and understood according to their bodily, sexual allure. Bonitzer's notion of the voice ultimately having to submit to the "destiny of the body" thus acquires a particular significance in the context of this film's narrative world given the expectation of the women in Gigi's household to effectively sell their bodies (as courtesans) in exchange for material gain. However, what is fascinating about Minnelli's use of the off-screen singing device is the refusal it suggests on the part of the woman's voice to submit to such a destiny.

Silverman might contend, of course, that this disembodiment of the female's voice is only achieved by containing it within a recessed space cut off from all meaning and productivity. According to that theorist, the confining of the woman's voice to "claustrophobic spaces" (what she also refers to as the [folding of] the female voice into 'an inner textual space'¹⁵) is another means by which Hollywood attempts to fend off the male's own psychic association (stemming from his experience as a foetus in the mother's womb) with interiority and vulnerability. This is something that Silverman argues mainstream cinema achieves by displacing this condition onto the woman and associating the male (wherever possible) with exteriority (e.g. via the voice-over) instead. In preventing Gigi's mother from appearing in person as a fully rounded, complete speaking self, it could be argued, conversely, that the film risks subjecting her to what Amy Lawrence refers to in her discussion of the "sacrifice" demanded of the adult female narrator in *To Kill a Mocking Bird* (Robert Mulligan, 1962) as 'the writing out of her own body'.¹⁶

It is certainly true that in transforming the role of Gigi's mother into that of an off-screen vocal presence, Minnelli does render her unable to participate (at least onscreen) in the life of the family and his approach does also make her prone (bearing in mind Mamita's reference at one point to her daughter having "neither the time nor the mind to take care of [Gigi]") to the charge of having abandoned her maternal responsibilities. This can be contrasted with Mamita and Gigi whose central place within the narrative, while making them more susceptible to the pressures and compromises that go with the use of ordinary speech and language, at the same time allows them to negotiate a position for themselves and to achieve some form of emotional interaction with the male characters that seems unavailable to this disembodied character. Yet to construe the film as simply endorsing the marginalised position that Andrée, by contrast, occupies within the narrative would be to neglect the highly self-conscious, purposeful manner in which it seeks to use her off-screen singing presence as a way of foregrounding the consequences for women like her who, resisting their social destinies, venture



outside their allotted path. In showing Mamita respond by closing the door so as to shut out the sound of her daughter's singing, the film is particularly at pains to make clear this older female's complicity in such a system of exclusion. The fact that it was Mamita who, by her own admission, allowed her daughter to take singing lessons in the first place deepens and complicates the insights offered here into her character even further by pointing to an instinctive desire—however much discredited and regretted by her later—to give expression to a more independent form of female selfhood. That this section of dialogue is actually triggered by Mamita's admission that she sometimes wished that Gigi had learned to dance reinforces this suggestion of her underlying empathy with the younger female's desire to express her identity in more creative ways. Her admission of regret at the opportunity that has been lost is heightened all the more, of course, by our awareness of Caron's own talents as a dancer, all of which lends greater poignancy, in turn, to Gigi's pleas to her grandmother to allow her to learn this artistic form of expression. And while Mamita proceeds to censor this impulse of hers by declaring that she does not want to make the same mistake twice, it is rather telling that, in dismissing her daughter's career, it is the menial nature of the roles she is given (rather than the opportunities for independence it allows) that she seizes on as the basis of her criticism.

Mamita's act of shutting the door on her daughter's singing therefore suggests the effectiveness of this voice-off device not just in expressing a sense of gender resistance and defiance on Andrée's own part but in bringing out a more complex side to Gingold's character and, linked to that, an intricate set of connections between all three of these females. All of this finds further scope for development during the scene where Gaston, during one of his impromptu visits to Mamita's apartment, decides to stay for the evening rather than go to his pre-arranged dinner party at the Eiffel Tower. In timing Alicia's next vocaloutburst so that it strikes up so soon after Gigi's feisty display of verbal sparring with Gaston during this scene (as Caron's character goads him about being able to beat him at cards as she leaves to take his message of apology to his uncle) Minnelli allows it to emerge on this occasion as if in some form of instinctive spirit of solidarity with this younger female whose own display of vocal defiance and independence now seems to find its natural point of extension and affinity in her mother's singing. The fact that Caron's own apparently not very proficient singing voice was dubbed by Marni Nixon during her musical numbers¹⁷ can be understood as strengthening this link even more since in striking up in this manner there is a sense in which Gigi's mother's singing is also managing to give vent to the suppressed voice of the actress who plays her daughter. As a result, the film is able to make creative capital out of a situation that, according to Lerner, was apparently such a source of discomfort to the producer Arthur Freed that the actress was only told about the decision to dub her voice at the last minute by Andre Previn as she turned up at the studio to record one of her songs.¹⁸ This can be contrasted with the scenario involving — *Lady* where the secret dubbing of Audrey Hepburn's voice (in that instance carried out with the very deliberate intention of withholding knowledge of the dubbing from the actress herself) tends to render the film much more complicit in Professor Higgins'/Rex Harrison's attempts to control Eliza's voice within the narrative.¹⁹ With *Gigi*, though, any more detri-

mental effects arising from the dubbing of Caron's voice are to a large extent offset by the film's otherwise deeply held commitment to portraying her character as a female adolescent who is already strongly in command of her speaking voice right from the outset of the narrative and whose feisty verbal sparring with the male protagonist, far from being a source of resentment to him or a provocation to seek control, is in fact a source of immense enjoyment to him.

That Gaston is able to admit quite openly to taking pleasure in Gigi's strong voice itself highlights the extent of his difference from *My Fair Lady*'s Professor Higgins. Indeed, in positioning one of the key instances where he does this just before Gigi's mother's singing crops up for the second time ("Oh let her, let her Mamita. It amuses me" Gaston says on hearing Gingold warn him that Gigi "takes advantage" of him) it is as if the director invites us to construe this admission by the male protagonist as granting yet further license to this latest eruption of female vocal excess from Andrée whose singing now reaches an especially piercing, high-pitched note on the final ascension of her scales. In showing Gaston not even so much as batting an eyelid at the sound of such singing, however, as he continues to look away in the opposite direction while aimlessly prodding away with his cane, Minnelli at the same time seems intent on qualifying (in very clear sighted fashion) the subversiveness of this admission by Jourdan's character. In foregrounding Gaston's obliviousness to this latest singing outburst, the director thus makes clear how inaudible to the male ear the female voice may become if it seeks to assert itself too radically outside of the woman's allotted social sphere.

In contrast to Gaston's impassivity, Mamita's response of walking across the room and shutting the door just as she had done in that earlier scene once again serves to emphasise her acute sensitivity to her daughter's singing. On this occasion, though, her action is accompanied by a closer, more intriguing view of her. On shutting the door, she is shown pausing there for a moment while casting her eyes downwards in the direction of her daughter's room and then across towards Gaston, as if suddenly moved to a deeper level of thought by the significance of what she has just heard and the action that she herself has just performed. Quite what her daughter's singing has managed to stir up in Mamita is hinted at in the very next shot when, on walking back into the middle of the room, she asks Gaston: "How ... how is Honoré these days?" Although this question of hers comes across like an attempt by her to put on a more casual air (as she seeks to pick up the earlier strand of conversation concerning Gaston's request for his uncle to stand in for him at the party), the timing of it (in following on so quickly from the previous shot) coupled with the sense of tension evident in her voice as she begins to speak (especially noticeable in the way that she falters on her initial utterance of the word 'how') alerts us to the possibility of this enquiry in fact betraying something of her earlier, more private, inner train of thought.

That there is some underlying form of connection between Mamita's reference to Honoré (/Maurice Chevalier) here and her act of closing the door on her daughter's singing just moments before becomes clearer when one considers this particular sequence in the context of the later encounter that takes place between these two older characters at Trouville. Unlike in Colette's short story where it is left a matter of speculation as to

whether Mamita's relationship with 'an elder Lachaille' is 'real or invented',²⁰ in the film Minnelli and Lerner use this seaside episode (which has no equivalent in the book) to offer us both incontrovertible proof of and considerable insight into this woman's past affair with Honoré. The precise occasion for this arises during the conversation these two characters have just before their duet "I Remember It Well" when, prompted by the sight of Gaston and Gigi having such fun on the beach, Honoré begins to reflect nostalgically on their own past relationship:

Honoré: We had good times too, didn't we? Come to think of it, those last days we spent together were by the sea, weren't they?

Mamita: Were they?

Honoré: Of course they were. On the Riviera. The pink villa.

Mamita: I only remember the blue villa.

Honoré: Which was that?

Mamita: The one belonging to the soprano.

Honoré: Aah [he laughs]. You knew.

Mamita: But of course.

Honoré: But I thought you left me because of that Austrian count?

Mamita: But of course. [For this line she lowers her voice for ironic effect.]

Honoré: But you didn't? [She nods her head in affirmation.] I'll tell you about that blue villa, Mamita. I was so much in love with you I wanted to marry you. Yes, it's true. I was beginning to think of marriage. Imagine! Marriage, me! [He laughs.] Oh no. I was really desperate. I had to do something. And what I did was the soprano.

Mamita: Thank you, Honoré. That is the most charming and endearing excuse for infidelity that I have ever heard.

Honoré: But I've never forgotten you. Nor the last evening we spent together. I can remember everything as if it were yesterday. ...

Mamita's disclosure that it was not in fact her involvement with "that Austrian count" but, rather, her discovery that Honoré was having an affair with a soprano that caused her to leave him is especially interesting when considered in the light of her behaviour during the earlier door closing sequence. For, considering the role that this other soprano figure played in the break up of her relationship with Honoré, it is as if, in shutting the door on her daughter's singing (the soprano nature of which is comically exaggerated by the extremely high pitched nature of one of the notes that Andrée hits) Mamita seeks to block out the sound of a voice that reminds her of what happened all those years ago. The painful recollection of this in turn helps to explain both the depth of emotion etched on her face during that sequence (as she pauses at the door before resuming her conversation with Gaston) and the disparaging attitude that she had displayed towards her daughter's singing earlier on in the film. Viewed in the context of all this, the title of the song that Mamita sings with Honoré becomes charged with an irony that extends well beyond its overt role as a commentary on this male character's imperfect memory, gesturing as it does towards the possibility

that Mamita, on being confronted with this everyday vocal reminder of his infidelity, is required to remember, all too well, what brought about the end of their affair.

The fact that Mamita refused to put up with Honoré's infidelity (despite the suggestions provided both here in the song and elsewhere in the narrative of her ongoing depth of feeling for him) endows that earlier door closing sequence with another layer of complexity. For, given the more extreme stance of rebellion and resistance that her daughter's singing career represents (embracing as it does an outright rejection of the role of courtesan that is expected of the women in Andrée's family), there is a sense in which, in shutting out the sound of that female's voice, Mamita also seeks to deny and repress a more independent, defiant side to her own self. The piercing, high pitched nature of such singing thus comes to express, on this reading, an emotional intensity and sense of resistance on Mamita's part that at the time she had to suppress or (in the latter case) articulate in more silent fashion through her tactful departure from Honoré for (ostensibly) "that Austrian count." The resilience and respect for the integrity of her own self that are implied by Mamita's decision to give up her relationship with Honoré are additionally important in suggesting an underlying bond of affinity between this older female figure and Gigi whose refusal of Gaston's offer for her to become his courtesan later on in the narrative also develops, in turn, those links between Caron's character and her mother that were first gestured at during the initial occurrence of this off-screen singing voice. The bond of affinity that exists between Gigi and her mother finds its most moving acknowledgement of all during the refusal scene itself. Having begun to explain to Gaston why she doesn't want to accept his offer, Gigi is shown getting up from where they have been so formally seated and moving across to the piano just as her speech reaches its most defiant point. "That won't do for me. I'm not changeable. That won't do for me!" she says with rising emotion as she sits down at the piano. The operatic song sheets belonging to her mother that are now so prominent in the immediate background just to her right poignantly confirm her growing sense of identification with this figure as, now using her own strong voice to stand up against the system and assert her refusal of what it demands, she tearfully marks out her resistance to the rest of her family's position:

Grandmama and Aunt Alicia are on your side, I know. But I think this concerns me a little too. And I think I should have something to say about it. And what I say is, it won't work. It won't work!

At this moment of crisis, Gigi understandably construes Mamita as in alliance with Alicia but, as we have already explored, one of the most significant aspects to the Trouville episode lies in its ability to reveal another more complex side to her grandmother. It is possible to detect this not just in the suggestions inherent in the dialogue of her refusal to accept Honoré's infidelity but also in the rhetorical emphasis that is placed on her laughter at various points during this sequence at the seaside. The most important instance of this occurs in the moments leading up to Mamita's encounter with Honoré when, in an ironic reversal of history abandonment of her for the soprano, it is the sound of Gingold's

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voice—as she can be heard laughing exuberantly at the sight of Gigi and Gaston trying to ride donkeys on the beach—that distracts him from his potential assignation with a younger woman. In demonstrating the ability of Mamita's laughter to pull Honoré away from this more preconditioned and well trodden path of sexual pursuit and conquest, Minnelli invites us to understand the kind of charismatic qualities that first attracted Chevalier's character to this female. He also does so in a manner that encourages certain parallels to be drawn between Honoré's affair with Mamita and Gaston's relationship with Gigi whose own irrepressible laughter is presented throughout this episode as having such a rejuvenating influence on that younger male figure. Although Mamita is understandably sceptical of Honoré's attempts to explain his infidelity on the grounds that he was 'so in love' with her that he "was beginning to think of marriage", this admission of his (which is given added conviction by the warmth and ease of rapport that develops between them during the number) tends to strengthen such an implied parallel by raising the possibility that Chevalier's character may have faced back then the same crisis with regard to Mamita that Gaston does later on in the film in relation to Gigi (albeit with very different outcomes).

In using this aural motif of laughter to bring out these under-

lying links between Gigi and her grandmother, the Trouville episode thus develops what had already begun during the preceding "The Night They Invited Champagne" number. A great deal of the pleasure offered by that number indeed comes from seeing Mamita letting go of her more disciplinarian maternal role as she gets swept along by the exuberance of Gigi's performance. This results in her waltzing around the room first with her granddaughter (at one point moving into a can-can style of dancing with her) and then with Gaston (singing out loud and letting out the occasional whoop of delight as she moves from one partner to the next) before eventually bursting out into laughter and emulating Gigi by popping her cheek so as to make the sound of a cork exploding from a bottle. This trend is continued during the Trouville sequence where Gigi's laughter on riding a donkey for the first time and then on falling down in a heap on the tennis court finds its delightful echo in Mamita's laughter at the young couple's antics. In adopting this mirroring strategy, the film therefore allows us to take pleasure not just in Gigi's reinvigorating effect on Gaston but in her ability to bring out a more youthful, vivacious side in her grandmother who, now removed from her sister's influence, is able to give freer rein to her natural instincts. As such, these sequences manage to point to a further



Rex Harrison and Audrey Hepburn, *My Fair Lady*

link not just between Mamita and Gigi but between these two characters and Gigi's mother whose own singing at the *Opéra-Comique* itself constitutes another fun-loving, life affirming use of the female voice.

This comedic spirit of vitality is something that helps strengthen the subversive bond of affinity between these three female characters that is both established and developed elsewhere through Minnelli's use of the off-screen singing voice. The latter finds its moment of culmination during the scene at Mamita's apartment where Gigi's mother's singing crops up for the third and last time. This occurs at the point where Alicia, having been informed by Mamita over the telephone that Gigi has turned down Gaston's offer for her to become his courtesan, decides to break her self imposed confinement within her own apartment by going to visit her sister. As she arrives at Mamita's place in great indignation, the following exchange between these two characters ensues:

Alicia: Now. Would you repeat that again, please?!

Mamita: She doesn't want to.

Alicia: She doesn't want to?

Mamita: She doesn't want to.

Alicia: Such stupidity is without equal in the entire history of human relations. [At this point Gigi's mother's singing strikes up off-screen. Alicia walks across the room and closes the door.] It must be your fault. It must be! You must have emphasised all the difficulties instead of the delights. What did you say to the little monster?

Mamita: Oh no, Alicia. Gigi is perhaps a little slow about certain things but just because she's not attracted to Gaston Lachaille doesn't make her a little monster.

Alicia: It doesn't make her a little princess. What did you say to her? Did you tell her about love, travel, moonlight, Italy? About humming birds in all the flowers and making love in a gardenia-scented garden?

Mamita: I couldn't tell her that, Alicia. I've never been further than the Riviera.

Alicia: Couldn't you have invented it?

Mamita: No, Alicia, I could not.

Alicia: It's incredible. Incredible! Where is she? Perhaps I should talk to her again and tell her what she's missing. It's the glory of romance, forgetting everything in the arms of the man who adores you, listening to the music of love in an eternal spring.

Mamita: And when eternal spring is over?

Alicia: Well, what difference does that make?

Mamita: It makes a great difference to Gigi. And shall I tell you something: I'm not sure I don't agree with her.

Alicia: You're a fool! And your granddaughter takes after you!

In having this off-screen singing voice assert itself just as Alicia derides the folly of her great niece's decision, Minnelli continues the pattern of significance associated with its role that he had established with its first occurrence in the film. But whereas on

that occasion, it had arisen in defiant response to Mamita's disparagement of her daughter's singing career, on this occasion it is Alicia's ridiculing of Andrée's own daughter that it serves to undercut. Contesting the absoluteness of the older woman's claim, it strikes up in ways that reinforce that emerging bond of affinity that was gestured at earlier between Gigi and her mother whose singing here, in reminding us of her rejection of the role that her daughter has just refused, also points, in turn, to the possibility of a longer history and broader network of female resistance existing beyond the confines of the on-screen world and apartment walls. That it is Alicia not Mamita who now responds by closing the door constitutes another significant variation on that earlier moment since, in showing the grandmother continuing to remain seated throughout and not making any attempt to fulfil her former role, Minnelli registers a significant breakdown in her resistance to the spirit of defiance that such a voice represents. Her identification with this is in turn reflected in her ability to discover a more independent voice of protest within herself. Thus, with her earlier disparagement of her daughter's singing now transferred implicitly to Alicia through the latter's act of shutting the door instead, Mamita proceeds to commit to a much more open alignment with Gigi and her vocal stance of resistance: forsaking her earlier deference to her sister's experience and judgement, she quietly but firmly rejects the criticisms levelled at both her and her granddaughter.

In arriving at this point of open defiance, Mamita consequently fulfils a subversive potential to her character that had also been hinted at in some of her earlier exchanges with Gaston when, amidst her otherwise effusive pampering and complimenting of him during his visits to her apartment, she would occasionally give vent to a more socially class conscious, critical form of voice. The first instance of this crops up during his initial visit there. On hearing him remark then: "Ah. It's so good to be here" as he sits enjoying a cup of her camomile tea, she responds in a tone of mock deference that both sanctions and yet is at the same time rendered heavily ironic by the implied social critique inherent in her actual words: "It's always a pleasure to watch the rich enjoying the comforts of the poor" she says before softening the satirical edge of this comment with a reassuring nod in his direction as she adds (still with a tone of mischievous irony in her voice and with a corresponding raising of her eyebrows): "Especially you, dear Gaston". Then, during his second visit she assumes an even more wily stance during one particular exchange between them in the kitchen. Standing this time with her back to him and facing the camera directly instead, she once again gives vent to her sense of social injustice but now in a way that actively seeks to gain some form of redress by extracting a material favour out of him. Hence, on hearing him admire her cooking, she follows up her initially more modest reaction: "Oh, it's just a pork cassoulet" by boldly asserting (in a shift to a highly self conscious mode of performance that is suggestive of her past skill in eliciting gifts from her rich male benefactors): "It was impossible to get any goose this week!" Her words duly have the desired effect of prompting Gaston to offer to "have them send [her] a brace [of these birds] from the country" and in doing so they are indicative of an opportunistic streak in Mamita that in turn serves to render her subsequent observation that Gigi takes advantage of him extremely ironic.

In rejecting the kind of romantic rhetoric that Alicia advocates

as a means of persuading Gigi into agreeing to Gaston's offer, Mamita's more openly oppositional responses during her later confrontation with her sister invite especially strong comparison with her granddaughter's earlier deconstruction of Gaston's promise "To take care of [her] beautifully." "Beautifully. That is, if I like it. They've pounded into my head that I'm backward for my age but I know very well what all this means. To take care of me beautifully means that I shall go away from here with you and that I should sleep in your bed" said Gigi then with an honest directness of approach that—apparently spoken "so innocently" by Caron "that the [Production] code administrator's office withdrew its objections"²¹—has the effect of completely disabling Gaston's attempts to romantically sweep aside the realities of the arrangements that he has just made with her grandmother. Mamita's assertion that the question of what happens "when eternal spring is over" does in fact make a great deal of difference to her and Gigi is borne out by the film's overall portrayal of Alicia as an aging ex courtesan who can only hang onto her former glamorous life by enclosing herself within a self contained world wherein she can relive her past conquests: "She never sets a foot out of her apartment or her past" observed Mamita shrewdly to Gaston during a brief conversation about her sister earlier on in the narrative. By inviting us to contrast Alicia's situation with that of Honoré—who was shown, just moments before this confrontation between the two sisters, openly celebrating, via the song "I'm Glad I'm Not Young Anymore", the even greater freedom and pleasures his age affords him in his ongoing pursuit of youthful mistresses—the film thus highlights the very different destinies available to men and women as they grow older in such a society.

In exploring the role played by this off-screen singing voice, then, we have noted its importance both as a means of opening up a more complex side to Mamita and as a way of charting her and Gigi's move towards occupying a position of open resistance and defiance as adult females in society. In managing to do so via a voice that remains unanchored to the visible female body and steadfastly rooted in a non-verbal, non-linguistic form of utterance, the film goes some way towards contesting Doane's scepticism about the possibility of establishing what she refers to as "a political erotics of the voice."²² Although she notes some attempts by contemporary avant-garde cinema to resist "the homogenizing effects of the traditional use of voice-off" through the deployment of strategies designed to produce a body/voice relation that is based not on "imaginary cohesion" but on "dispersal, division, fragmentation"²³ she warns that an emphasis on the sensory elements (or erotics) of the voice is in danger of abstracting the latter from meaning (or even of construing it as opposed to meaning) and of isolating its "effectivity" in a way that "risks a crude materialism wherein the physical properties of the medium have the inherent and final power of determining its reading."²⁴ Doane argues that the notion of "a political erotics of the voice is particularly problematic from a feminist perspective"²⁵ given the centrality of the female body as a site of struggle against patriarchy. Thus, while she acknowledges "that there is a danger in grounding a politics on a conceptualization of the body because the body has always been the site of woman's oppression", she goes on to contend that "it is precisely because the body has been a major site of oppression that perhaps it must be the site of the battle to be waged."²⁶ Yet as I hope the pre-

ceding analysis has demonstrated, far from encouraging an isolationist approach that results in the materialism of the woman's voice being stressed at the expense of a consideration of the latter's relevance to the wider meaning of the film as a whole, this focus on the use of a non-verbal, all singing form of female voice-off in *Gigi* has in fact allowed us to arrive at a much fuller appreciation of this text's complexity and its sensitivity to feminist issues and concerns. Indeed, unlike the response enacted first by Mamita and then by Alicia of closing the door on this woman's singing, an attentive listening to such a voice on the movie audience's part may lead us to construe it as an aural key that, rich in signification, is capable of opening up new dimensions of meaning to the film. In demonstrating an ability to integrate the latter's various parts into a stronger cohesive whole, this singing voice-off device also outstrips the ideological role ascribed to it by Silverman and Doane, the unity of effect it achieves extending well beyond the purely spatial to an evocation of a collective stance of resistance that connects and brings together its on- and off-screen female characters.

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Notes

- 1 Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema* (edited and translated by Claudia Gorbman), New York and Chichester, West Sussex; Columbia University Press, 1999. The original French version *La Voix au cinéma* was first published in 1982.
- 2 Chion, p.21.
- 3 Mary Ann Doane, 'The Voice in the Cinema: The Articulation of Body and Space' in Elisabeth Weis and John Belton (eds.), *Film Sound: Theory and Practice*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1985, pp. 162-76.
- 4 Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988.
- 5 Silverman, p.48.
- 6 Doane, p.167.
- 7 Doane, pp.167-68.
- 8 Silverman, p.39.
- 9 Vincente Minnelli with Hector Arce, *I Remember It Well*, New York, London and Toronto: Samuel French, p.305.
- 10 Minnelli, p.306.
- 11 ibid
- 12 ibid
- 13 Colette, *Gigi and the Cat*, London: Vintage, 2001 (first published in 1944), pp. 9-10.
- 14 Colette, p. 21.
- 15 Silverman, p.56.
- 16 Amy Lawrence, *Echo and Narcissus*, Oxford: University of California Press, 1991, p.170.
- 17 Alan Jay Lerner, *The Street Where I Live*. Hodder and Stoughton, 1978, p.153.
- 18 Lerner, pp.153-54.
- 19 On this, see Susan Smith , *The Musical: Race, Gender and Performance*, London: Wallflower Press, 2005, pp. 59-69.
- 20 Colette, p.12.
- 21 Minnelli, p.307.
- 22 Doane, p.173.
- 23 ibid
- 24 ibid
- 25 Doane, p.174.
- 26 ibid

The Risk of Ambiguity

RECONSIDERING ZAVATTINI'S FILM ETHICS

NICHOLAS BALAISIS

Italian critic, theorist, and filmmaker Cesare Zavattini is perhaps best known for synthesizing the aims of neo-realism and for championing its everyday aesthetic. This notion of the everyday is for Zavattini a profoundly ethical notion that constitutes the heart of his theses on cinema. His *Thesis on Neo-Realism* (1952) reads like a manifesto not just for neo-realism, but more broadly for an ethical mode of filmmaking. In examining how Zavattini construes his notion of film ethics, I will discuss some of the major tenets as well as the problems in his articulation. Indeed, Zavattini posits two distinct and contradictory notions of ethics, one that draws heavily from phenomenological traditions and methods, and one that has more overtly political and allegorical intentions. These distinctions can be seen in his writing, but are made especially explicit in one of his major efforts as a filmmaker: the short reenactment documentary *Love of a Mother* (1953). The film reveals Zavattini's resistance and ambivalence towards his own phenomenological tendencies on account of the communicative risks and ethical ambiguities that this subtler aesthetic implies.

Zavattini's film ethics must first be understood in terms of an ethics of seeing or of perception. In the first paragraph of his *Thesis*, Zavattini discusses the common misperception of the everyday as a banal and unworthy site of attention, cinematic or otherwise.

There is no doubt that our first, and most superficial, relation to daily existence is boredom. Reality seems deprived of all interest as long as we cannot succeed in surmounting and overcoming our moral and intellectual sloth. It is, therefore, not surprising that the cinema has always felt the "natural" and practically inevitable necessity of inserting a story into reality in order to make it thrilling and spectacular [...] Yet, in fact, we are now aware that reality is enormously rich. We simply had to learn how to look at it.

According to Zavattini, our relationship to the quotidian is marred by a passive mode of perception that flattens our full comprehension and appreciation of it. This notion bears close resemblance to the concerns of phenomenology and its methods. In one respect, phenomenology is oriented by a desire to unmoor and loosen conventional and habitual ways of perceiving the world. For Merleau-Ponty, for example, the fundamental phenomenological objective is to overcome the *natural attitude* towards things, our tendency to see the world through a con-

gealed veil of clichés. As Vivian Sobchack puts it, "the radical reflection of phenomenology attempts to *reanimate* the taken-for-granted and the institutionally sedimented." The boredom that Zavattini sees in our relation to daily reality represents one example of sedimented, taken-for-granted perception. For phenomenologists, then, the everyday is an important site of attention and investigation because it is the site most subject to habitual modes of perception and thus in most need of re-animation.

For Zavattini, however, cinema complicates the problem of habitual perception. The majority of narrative cinema, as he sees it, reinforces these negative tendencies through the excision of the everyday and the insertion of artificial spectacle, further deepening our prejudice against the everyday. As a way of marking the difference between Hollywood and neorealism, Zavattini gives the example of an American producer who describes the differences between an Italian neorealist film and a typical Hollywood film: "In America, the scene of a plane passing over is shown in this sequence: a plane passes, machine-gun fire opens, the plane falls. In Italy: a plane passes, it passes again, and then again." This brief description exemplifies Zavattini's concern with conventional narrative cinema and offers a good example of his own filmic aims. In the American example, the plane's passing (a routine, relatively banal event) is artificially broken up and punctuated by gunfire and the plane's subsequent crash. The shooting down of the plane privileges the spectacular action happening *to* the plane and ignores the reality of the plane itself. By having the plane shot down, the film treats the plane merely as a vehicle for narrative action, a means for the creation of dramatic spectacle. For Zavattini, this familiar narrative sequence only reinforces our dependency on 'artificial' spectacle and disables our capacity to see the world outside of this conventional schema: to see the plane on its own terms.

The proper task of cinema, for Zavattini, should not be to reinforce these weak, clichéd modes of perception, as Hollywood does, but should work to loosen these tendencies by re-focusing our attention to the habitually elided regions of reality. As he argues, this requires the almost Nietzschean task of *overcoming*—to transcend "our moral and intellectual sloth." Cinema must abandon "trick photography, process shots, the infinite subterfuges so dear to Méliès" for it no longer needs them; it can locate and tease out spectacle within the most basic environment. This overcoming of our habitually entrenched perceptions must come not through the lazy action of cutting the "boring" scenes out of the frame, but

rather, the challenge is to expose and unearth the spectacle already present *within* the seemingly banal. Commenting on the American producer's remark, Zavattini exclaims: "It is not enough to have the plane pass by three times; it must pass by twenty times." Cinema must not just turn towards the seemingly banal, but it must *stay* there. In staying with the phenomenon for longer, more deliberate time, the phenomenon has "all the potential of being reborn." Thus, in a method similar to that of phenomenological *thick description*, Zavattini suggests that a more deliberate, temporally drawn-out cinematic treatment of banal objects will create new associations and enliven those objects. In the American example of the plane being shot down, for example, the plane retains a common military association: the plane as a mechanism and object of war. If the plane were to pass twenty times in front of the lens, however, the plane would slowly begin to shed those typical, rigid associations. Perhaps anticipating the time-experiments of Andy Warhol, the repetition of the passing plane invites a much more subtle perception of the plane, opening up possible meditations on movement, rhythm, modernity or on time itself. Whatever the associations, the objective here is to visually resuscitate phenomena that have become weighed down and deadened with clichés.

This 'ethics of seeing' of course recalls André Bazin's famous description of cinema's capacity to re-vivify perception: to strip the "object of all those ways of seeing it, those piled up preconceptions, that spiritual dust and grime with which my eyes have covered it." For Bazin, a writer whose reading of Zavattini I am greatly indebted to, one of the best examples of this phenomenological treatment is the oft-described 'maid sequence' in De Sica and Zavattini's *Umberto D* (1952). In this brief, unspoken scene, the ethics of this approach are made most apparent. The scene occurs midway through the film, where for a few minutes, the film presents the silent activities of one of the film's minor characters, Umberto D's maid. In the scene, Maria slowly and deliberately performs the mundane tasks of her job: ridding the ants from wall, cleaning the kitchen, grinding the coffee. Under the sensitive eye of De Sica, what would perhaps normally be excised is instead brought to the foreground for the viewer to contemplate and inspect in what feels like real-time.

From the point of view of *Umberto D*'s broader narrative, the scene seems to stand outside the rest of the film. It does not move the plot forward or contain any narratively pragmatic function. The maid appears, performs her activities, and just as subtly as she entered, she recedes and the scene folds back into the rest of the film. Bazin describes the maid as "the invisible subject," referring to the fact that the maid's actions are dissolved



once the action of her sequence is over. "(T)he subject exists before the working scenario, but it does not exist afterward. Only the "fact" exists which the subject had itself forecast." There is a ghostly, ephemeral aspect to the scene, not only in the trance-like character of her actions, but in the scene's function within the film, as it manifests subtly but suddenly, gently dissolving into the rest of the film without any causal links. Her presence, therefore, holds meaning only for the instant that she appears and does not come into the service of another link in the plot or grand narrative meaning. In this way, there is an extra-diegetic, existential aspect to her appearance. In an expression borrowed from Dudley Andrew, the maid appears "lifted" out of the frame of the film; she is meaningful only as a temporary trace, a brief and mysterious flash in continuum of the film. Similar to the example of the passing plane, the scene does not invite us to consider her as merely one event in a series of continuous narrative events. Rather, the scene treats the maid in an autonomous, singular manner, indexing her enigmatic sorrow and emotional weight and allowing her to exist in a space not entirely bound by the narrative limits of film.

For Bazin, it is precisely this effort to represent a character beyond both narrative function and political allegory that makes it an ethical treatment. In lauding neo-realist aesthetics, Bazin suggests that their strength lies in their sensitive, phenomenological treatment of profilmic reality:

Recent Italian films all reject implicitly or explicitly, with humor, satire or poetry, the reality they are using, but they know better, no matter how clear the stand taken, than to treat this reality as a medium or a means to an end [...] They never forget that the world *is*, quite simply, before it is something to be condemned."

Bazin argues that while the reality the Italians were filming was often ugly and unjust, they did not simply denounce and reject reality *in toto* by resorting to crude political allegory. While Bazin acknowledges the obvious political motivation of the neo-realists, he observes that this political intent is muted or restrained in their film treatments. The filmmakers may have justifiably rejected the reality they faced in the post-war landscape, however, their representations did not engage in a simple process of political allegory. They did not use the reality before them as a means to an end, a vehicle for expressing a political position. For example, the maid in the film does not simply become a blunt symbol of Italian social reality, standing as an example of poor social services or the class struggle. This is precisely the ethical terrain for Bazin, as the tendency to allegorize necessarily does violence to the profilmic reality by over-inscribing it with an overt, and very often didactic message. The rejection of that reality, if there is to be one, must follow, and be secondary to, a detailed *encounter* with profilmic reality, so as to preserve the ambiguities and mysteries embedded in the phenomenal world. The richness of the maid scene, as Bazin argues, is precisely its asymptotic properties, the fact that as viewers, we are never fully able to apprehend the images in a definitive way with a fixed meaning or association. Rather, there is something enigmatic about her gestures that index a generalized melancholia beyond our full scope. Gilles Deleuze perhaps best captures the depth of this enigmatic

quality in his reading of the film's final moment: "And her eyes meet her pregnant woman's belly, and it is as though all the misery in the world were going to be born."

If the scene from *Umberto D* embodies the more phenomenological aspects of Zavattini's film ethics, then his short film, *Love of a Mother*, displays his competing tendency toward allegory and determinate political meaning. In 1953, roughly the same time as Zavattini's thesis was published, the omnibus film project *Love in the City* was produced, assembling several well-known Italian directors in order to produce a series of short films drawn from the newspaper headlines of the day. Constructed as a visual "magazine," each vignette intended to highlight a particular event in city-life drawn from the "anonymous pages of the newspaper." The film employed the services of non-actors to reenact events from their daily life as a means of bringing a more humane approach to the cold daily headlines. Zavattini's film, *Love of a Mother*, concerns Caterina Rigoglioso, a woman who abandons her child because of the burden of poverty and unemployment, only to seek him out again after enduring the pain of loss and remorse. In the narrated preamble we learn that Caterina has "consented to re-live her hours of agony before our cameras, step by step."

In a strange parallel to the maid scene, *Love of a Mother* is meticulous in its careful re-tracing of the banal events that precede her climactic decision; we see her looking for a job, waiting at the welfare office, pacing through the city, and finally, waiting with her child in a field before slowly taking her leave of him. Unlike the maid scene with its subtle rendering, the protagonist in *Love of a Mother* produces none of the rich ambiguities experienced in *Umberto D*. Rather than a provocative and undulating sense of empathy and detachment, *Love of Mother* strikes us as immediately cold. Caterina proceeds through her actions with a stiff awkwardness that bespeaks of her discomfort with her 'performance.' The film conveys the content of the original headline event, but lacks intrigue or suspense and instead feels artificial and staged. The repeated references by the voice-over to the fact that this is a "real woman" and a "real story" seem to overcompensate for the wooden quality of Caterina's performance. As David Overby reminds us, Zavattini had so vilified the role of the "star" that he had in turn neglected the performative requirements of the medium. Citing *Umberto D* as example, Overby stresses that it was not the fact that Umberto was, in *reality*, an aging professor that lent authenticity and sensitivity to his role but was rather his performance as Umberto that did so—"The professor was very effective in the convincing *performance* he gave, but not because "he was the character." The premise, for Zavattini, is that a legitimate character (with a real name) "liberates" the screen from the artifice of acting, no doubt by virtue of their intimate *proximity* to the character. What Zavattini overlooks is the fact that the illusion of "non-acting" is ultimately an effect of style and technique and not that of "absolute reality." What is ultimately responsible for conveying the truth of the character is not the person or personality him or herself, but the presentation—the visual rendering—of that character on the screen.

What lends authenticity to Caterina's performance, ironically, is not the performance itself but the viewer's prior knowledge of her as a real woman plucked from the pages of the day's news headlines. The film cannot convey this 'authenticity' (between event and reenactment, actor and character) through the qual-

ty of the acting alone, and instead relies upon the supplementary index of devices such as the film's opening narration - "this is a real girl." If the film *does* have an emotional appeal, it lies in the empathy the viewer feels for Caterina, however, it is an empathy that anticipates her performance. From the moment Caterina appears onscreen she bears the assigned mark of both negligent mother and economic victim. She is thus already inscribed in an allegorical structure before she even begins to reenact the event. If the film is compelling, it is because of our anterior knowledge of the woman and our attempt to reconcile the woman who has been described to us and the woman who we see onscreen. We do not watch on account of Caterina's particular performance - what we actually see onscreen in front of us - but because of what we *might* see or might discover, based upon what we have been foretold. Therefore, it is the narrator's introduction and coding of Caterina that holds our gaze and not Caterina's performance on its own. In employing a 'real' person and thus in trying to move away from allegory and abstraction, Zavattini has introduced them at a different level. Since the woman's performance alone does not arouse any sense of immediacy or direct contact, as Zavattini desires, the viewer must seek *beyond* the woman herself - to her status as a real person - to find sympathy and meaning. It is thus the inverse of what Zavattini feared for in the representation of the actor, where our extra-diegetic knowledge of the actor would sever us from the reality onscreen. In this case, the unconvincing and heavy-handed performance forces us outside of the story, to our knowledge of her as a "real living person."

The film fails, therefore, precisely because of its over-arching focus on message at the expense of phenomenal content. As Ivone Margulies argues, as an exercise in reenactment, the film aims to produce a reflective meditation on the part of the subject themselves, a conscious coming-to-terms with the reasons and conditions of the event—filmic psychoanalysis. More importantly, the reenactment orients to an audience as moral *exemplum* with an overtly prescriptive function - "The screened life provides a corrective mirror or a model for social action." In a piece describing the difference between example and exemplum, April Alliston argues that "the text's status as exemplum takes precedence over its status as representation [...] the text asks to be read as an example capable of generating real action through imitation, rather than as an imitation of real action." Caterina's methodical re-tracing is not intended merely to induce a contemplative reflection of the event by the viewer, but indeed aims to produce *social action*: watching the film should discourage child abandonment and promote family unity. The film concludes, after all, with Caterina and her son happily re-united in the orphanage, confirming the moral victory of the film. The film thus not only figures Caterina as symptom of certain negative social structures (the failure of the welfare state) but adds a second aspect of social instruction. The film's rigid moral agenda, in other words, is transparently on display, inviting the viewer either to accept or reject the film's proposition.

As a result of the film's tightly governed moral framework, the film slips into the territory of cliché. Ironically, the last sequence of the film, with its over-emphatic happy ending, seems to echo the worst of Hollywood cinema and its moral manipulations. As a result, the rich phenomenological freeplay intended by the example of the plane sequence and actualized in the maid scene

are closed off in the film. Within this moral tale, the everyday has again congealed into a fixed, indexical meaning; the subtle, banal gestures that Caterina performs do not open up new associations of the phenomenal world but point soberly in a single and decidedly un-ambiguous direction.

How do we read these contradictions within the broad spectrum of Zavattini's work? How do we reconcile his phenomenological tendencies with his rigidly allegorical ones? Rather than seeing *Love of a Mother* simply as an aberrant failure or departure from his writing, I believe the latter film exhibits the precariousness at the heart of Zavattini's film ethics. Toward the end of his *Thesis*, Zavattini makes an interesting, if unintended, admission. In describing how a director might properly capture the ambiguous, world-in-flux before the lens, Zavattini, using himself as example, acknowledges the problem of *will*:

I must constantly pull myself to a halt with both hands so as to refuse my imagination entrance into my work. I have enough imagination in the traditional sense of the word to sell and resell, but neorealism requires us to allow our imagination to exercise itself only *in loco* and through reality, for the situations increase their natural imaginative force when they are studies in depth.

What is interesting here is that the obstacles that Zavattini points to are not, perhaps strangely, external phenomena. In trying to achieve an "in depth" study, the obstacle he mentions is not tied to the mechanics of film practice, such as working with actors or forging a script. Rather, the principle obstacle for his method lies at the level of his own personal will: a conflict between intention and restraint. For Zavattini, there seems to be a split tendency between the desire to apply his "imagination" to the reality before him, to inscribe an argument, to build an allegorical tale, and the desire to hold back, restrain and allow things to happen "on the spot," through a spontaneous "encounter." In the plane or maid sequence, we witness this restraint and yielding of the director before the profilmic reality: what Bazin describes as letting the world *be* before condemning it. In the latter case of *Love of a Mother*, it is Zavattini's over-reaching and unrestrained imagination, his tendency to over-code and to inscribe the film with his own argument that predominates. Why this contradiction? It appears that the difficulty of the phenomenological instinct is that it leads to ephemeral, enigmatic treatments; it risks merely passing before the viewer's eye and disappearing without marked effect. In other words, it risks being socially ineffectual. With moral allegory, at least, the political message and social intentions are clear if not didactic and over-stated. Zavattini's film, therefore, is representative not simply of a flat-out failure, but perhaps a fear on his part of losing the message within the delicately restrained approach of the maid scene. It seems that in *Love of a Mother*, it is Zavattini's more pragmatic, communicative desires that triumph over his desire for subtlety, ambiguity and a more humanist film ethic.

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INTERVIEW

JOAN CHEN

Actor, screenwriter, director, Chinese, American, woman, mother: Who is Joan Chen?

International star Joan Chen is a woman of extraordinary talent. She is a well-respected actress as well as a daring director. Joan started her acting career at the early age of fourteen in 1977, when China was in turmoil during the Cultural Revolution, and has since starred in over fifty films. In 1980, she garnered the best actress award in China for her role in *The Little Flower* (*Xiao Hua*). She left China to attend university in the US in 1981, and later became a US citizen in 1988.

She now divides her time between living in San Francisco with her family, and working throughout the States, as well as, frequently, Asia. She is a walking example of the harmonious mix of Eastern and Western culture, and the most amazing thing is her ability to strike a balance between her career and her personal life. Female directors, unlike male, have the added pressure of being judged not only on the success of their career, but also on their role as wife and mother. Only a person of multiple talents and capabilities can master this division of self in such a manner as to gain recognition in all aspects of her life.



Selected Filmography as Actress:

- 2007: Lust, Caution (Se Jie) d: Ang Lee
The Sun Also Rises (Tai Yang Zhao Chang Sheng Qi)
d: Jiang Wen
Tonight at Noon d: Michael Almereyda
All God's Children Can Dance d: Robert Logevall
The Home Song Stories d: Tony Ayres
- 2006: Americanese d: Eric Byler
- 2005: Sunflower (Xiang Ri Kui) d: Zhang Yang
- 2004: Saving Face d: Alice Wu
Jasmine Flower (Mo Li Hua Kai) d: Hou Yong
Red Rose White Rose (Hong Meigui, Bai Meigui)
d: Stanley Kwan
- 1993: Heaven and Earth d: Oliver Stone
Temptation of a Monk (You Seng) d: Clara Law
- 1991: Twin Peaks (TV) d: David Lynch
- 1987: The Last Emperor d: Bernardo Bertolucci
- 1986: Tai-Pan d: Daryl Duke
- 1980: The Little Flower (*Xiao Hua*) d: Zhang Zheng

As Director:

- 2000: Autumn in New York
- 1998: Xiu Xiu: The Sent-Down Girl (*Tian Yu*), also as writer

Joan Chen in Jiang Wen's *The Sun Also Rises* (2007)



The following article has been assembled from material gathered during two conversations I had with Joan Chen, between September, 2005, at the Toronto International Film Festival and May, 2007, at the San Francisco International Film Festival. The interviews were conducted in Chinese and I'd like to thank Yan Woo for transcribing the Chinese text.

Alice Shih: Seeing you, Joan, on the big screen has always been a pleasure, but I was particularly thrilled to witness your stage performance narrating for Guy Maddin's *Brand Upon the Brain* at the 50th San Francisco International Film Festival. During the performance, you even sang a Chinese lullaby! I asked Guy right after the show about you and he said, "I really like Joan's performance, particularly her orgasms..."

Joan Chen: (laugh) Did you sense my fear while I was up there? I'm prone to stage fright and I'm really afraid of crowds! I first noticed it when I was in my teen years, touring with a university performance troupe. When I'm on set, I feel somewhat protected by the crew and I can give myself completely. This sense of security is gone when I'm in front of a crowd. I remember there were a couple of times when I had to speak on stage, and I was so nervous that I was gasping for breath! David Henry Hwang has on several occasions invited me to work with him on Broadway. The scripts and the parts offered to me were indeed excellent but I didn't have the courage. I'm still hoping that he will one day

adapt these projects for the big screen!

Recently, I agreed to lecture at Stanford University and to narrate for Guy's film. I accepted these offers as I believe one must constantly improve and learn new skills to advance. If you thought that you had already seen or experienced everything that the world had to offer, then what would be the point of living? For me, after realizing that going on stage is one of my worst fears, I consider these are my best opportunities to overcome it.

I had written down more than ten pages of notes for the Stanford lecture, and I memorized everything! Who on earth would memorize their notes word for word? That was because I was so afraid! I ended up not using my scripted notes, and I take that as a step forward. As for this narration on stage, I was so afraid at the beginning, but after rehearsals I understood and really appreciated the creativity of Guy's film. I haven't seen anything as innovative as his film before and it would definitely be my gain if I could be a part of this special event and work on my stage fright management at the same time. This was an excellent exercise to conquer my own psychological barrier and it may lead to my doing stage performances in the future, although film is still my first love.

There are always new challenges to face in life and we should not be afraid to step out of our comfort zone. It was in this spirit that I decided to come to America. New territories will always



be somewhat uncomfortable but the courage to overcome new obstacles is necessary for our own growth and maturity. I learned this from my parents. They are quite elderly now, but even today, they are never afraid to face new challenges.

AS: I think you are one of the few artists who truly welcome challenges; otherwise you wouldn't have shifted from playing your usual role, the glamorous woman, to characters who were rather plain and down-to-earth like in *Saving Face* (2004) and *Sunflower* (2005). The most impressive of all is the ultimate challenge of the real-life role of writer-director in *Xiu Xiu: The Sent-Down Girl* (*Tian Yu*) in 1998. What motivated you to put such a powerful film on screen?

JC: My good friend Yan Geling had written this bleak and beautiful novella, *Tian Yu*, which was based on the real-life experiences of a friend who was relocated to Tibet in her teens. She researched and put in other elements in her novella, which gave the whole story a spiritual dimension. I think this story is very important for my generation of Chinese as we had heard so much about people being relocated to Tibet since we were about eight years old. Our families would constantly discuss ways to avoid relocation with friends and relatives around the dinner table. My parents' strategy was to have my brother trained to become a professional athlete; he ended up not finishing high school to pursue this goal. I started working in film studios when I was fourteen, which meant that we were both very lucky to be given the option of staying in the city, as a result of our parents'

hard work and thoughtfulness. There was on-going news from and about these Tibetan exiles while I was growing up and these stayed in my mind. The sacrifice of their entire youth left a permanent scar on our generation of Chinese. I never had the intention of being a writer or a director before, but I was compelled to put this novella on screen after reading this powerful story.

AS: After finishing this emotionally-disturbing and multiple-award winner, Hollywood beckoned you to direct *Autumn in New York*, a high-budget commercial film. No woman of Asian ethnicity had been granted the honour of working as a Hollywood director before; how did you journey through this experience?

JC: It was purely coincidental that *Xiu Xiu* was playing to positive press in the States when they were looking for a new director for *Autumn in New York*. The original director had a fall-out with Richard Gere. They had to start shooting in July or they wouldn't be able to catch the autumn scenery needed for the story. The two producers were reading press reviews of my direction and they were laughing at the idea of asking me, but they couldn't think of anybody else, so they gave it a try anyway. On my end, I also thought it was impossible, but I agreed to have a meeting. The meeting went well and I realized that this was a rare opportunity; on their side, they were impressed by my attitude. They proceeded to seek approval from the studio executives and the stars. After Richard Gere saw *Xiu Xiu*, he agreed to me being the

director. I flew to New York to meet with Richard; we discussed how I was going to handle the script, and the deal was finalized.

AS: You haven't limited yourself to big-budget films thereafter, as some talents as established as you might. You went on to work with new directors who were practically unknown at the time, like Alice Wu, who offered you an interesting role instead of a big paycheque. I'm sure you could get more challenging roles if you lived in Asia. Why did you choose to live in North America?

JC: I'm not the same person I was ten years ago. Back then, my career in film was my first priority. When I first met my husband, he knew then who I was and accepted that my work would occasionally take me away from my family. I was away frequently on shoots after we were married and he was supportive of that. It was hard at times but this scenario was part of our family life. Today, the situation is reversed and my family is top on my priority list; film has dropped down to second place. I love my family and I love film, too. However, I sensed that my family's need for me far exceeded the celluloid world's. Therefore, I won't accept just any work and I'm limiting myself to a maximum of two out-of-town shoots a year so I can spend more time with my daughters.

AS: You have in the past year worked on some important films including Jiang Wen's *The Sun Also Rises* (*Tai yang zhao chang sheng qì*). Can you tell us your experience working with Jiang?

JC: I feel that Jiang is the best director in all of China. The structure of the Chinese film industry certainly generates a lot of obstacles for people like him. I haven't seen the final cut of *Sun* so I can't make any comments, but throughout the entire shoot, I saw him as a genius at work. In every aspect of the production, from analyzing the script to the choice of makeup and costume to enhance a certain character, there were times when not a single member of the crew was at par with him. He retains a certain purity in his personality, despite his complexity. He kept saying that he was still learning to be a people-person. In fact, he really isn't slick compared with people of his own generation and background. He is not the political type of person who cautiously considers his next move; he's just an artistic genius constantly at work.

When I first received Jiang's script, I found the character that I was going to play quite a nosy "scatterbrain". Later I found out from him that this character was based on an actual woman who had fascinated him when he was in his teens. This woman refused to grow up and lived entirely on instinct. After I finished the shoot, I gradually realized why men develop a kind of fascination with women like her. It's because they are very generous with their affection and don't hold back. Intelligent women are very calculating with their emotions; they do not like to make many mistakes on the road to love. The amount of affection they give is returned in proportion, but this is definitely not the character I play. She exposes her passion and gives it away completely. Men really appreciate this as she doesn't demand any commitment in return; not even a hint of marriage was brought up during a relationship. I was not a calculating lover when I was young. I also have some regrets in my love life, therefore I understand this character well. I've passed that age and I'm not behaving like that anymore, but this character doesn't know how to

Lu Lu in Joan Chen's *Xiu-Xiu: The Sent-down Girl* (1988)



change and will stay the same even when she reaches her eighties. Although I thought of her as brainless at the beginning, I found her very adorable and fun at the end.

AS: You are also in Ang Lee's latest work, *Lust, Caution*. (*Se jie*), which will kick off the 75th Venice Film Festival. I know that Ang has re-written the script to expand your part. Can you tell us why it has taken so long for your collaboration? **JC:**

I knew Ang when he was a struggling student at New York University, waiting for his break. He was working on *Wedding Banquet* (*Hsi Yen*, 1993) at the time and he somewhat based the background of his female lead on me; for example, she was originally from Shanghai. He was thinking of casting me as this character for more than three years until he realized that he had to use a Taiwanese actress for the part since the funding for this film was through Taiwan's Central Motion Picture Corporation, which runs on Taiwanese taxpayer's money and employment agreements. I missed this early chance of working with him as I'm not Taiwanese.

I have been following Ang's career and we occasionally correspond. I never thought that after all these years, and at my age, he would offer me this bit part! I've read the novel *Se jie* by Eileen Chang and the role of the wife is very small. I thought "if Ang is the director, I might as well accept so I can observe him at work." I haven't been a director for some time now, yet after having been a director twice, every film that I have worked on since was

like a directing lesson for me. When I see other directors at work, I picture how I would do the scene myself. My observations on set are more comprehensive and it would be more fun observing Ang now than ever. Ang expanded my part but I haven't seen the result of it yet. I spent about a month's time observing him and I found his filmmaking process extremely educational.

My character as the Wife is not particularly likeable. As I play the wife of Tony Chiu Wai Leung and this story is about him and his mistress, you can figure that out. I don't know yet what the sentiment on screen is, but I was trying to give this Wife some charm, grace and humour. Young people may not know how to handle her predicament, but she has been through a lot and nothing much could make her lose control. Her life is intertwined with her husband's; both she and her husband are fully aware of that. She also sees beyond her relationship with him on a purely emotional level, understanding that there is more than just love and affection in a relationship. So she chooses to put all her attention on her mahjong game, where she can control the outcome. Her reaction towards her husband's mistress and her mahjong game is totally inverted. That possesses a certain level of humour and irony in itself.

Working opposite Tony is just great! I really enjoy working with him as he is such a special actor. He is so rich at heart and so precise in his performance. He possesses a lot of inner strength like he was harbouring an imminent explosion. I fell in love with his performance when I first saw him on screen and after working opposite him in the few scenes that we had together, I got to appreciate him even more!

AS: How do you find Ang after all these years? Did you see any big changes in him?

JC: He is definitely more knowledgeable in his craft than before. He had to wait for six years before his first break, and his endurance proved that he has real passion as well as talent. He is now a very mature director who understands every aspect of filmmaking. At the same time, he possesses the Chinese virtue of modesty. This virtue not only makes a person more amiable, it is in fact a prerequisite for a good director. With modesty, a director is open to discuss and learn from other crew members. He doesn't get arrogant because he is successful in both the East and the West. Modesty improves his craft constantly.

AS: You are very familiar with production both in Asia and North America. The two practices are very different as North America is union-dominated. Is there a way to bring together the best of both worlds into a new form of collaboration for co-productions?

JC: I think Ang Lee is doing it already. He wisely utilizes the skills he learned in the West and applies them in the East, and sneaks in Eastern elements when he is shooting in the West. This "zigzag" method greatly improves his filmmaking process. Ang is able to have a lot of world-class cameramen working as assistants in his production. Therefore, his lighting design is very innovative and different from a traditional Hollywood work crew. Positions are also very well-defined in the Western crew: the director and the personal assistant, the division of labour between the three assistant directors and the relationship of the director and all the assistants. Powerful Hollywood directors are still required to follow the call sheet and the assistant directors

could still "advise" the director at times. But when I was shooting with Jiang Wen in China, no one dared say "No" or advise the director. Everyone was a "yes" man. I understand that flexibility is definitely needed for spontaneous creativity, but when the crew is undisciplined, its structure will gradually disintegrate. The Chinese crew is indeed very flexible, but lacks any structure. Therefore I think Ang is creating a powerhouse by combining elements of the East and the West.

I'm sure that the West has a much better understanding of China compared to twenty years ago. China had closed herself off from the rest of the world for an extended period of time and it has taken awhile for the West to get accustomed to her culture. Film is part of the whole culture and it is easy to understand why it might be difficult for one culture to appreciate another. The Chinese view of the West is incomplete and stereotypical, and vice versa. With increased trade and cultural exchanges between both worlds, I'm sure the situation will improve. In fact, this misinterpretation of cultures could add more colour to our daily lives. It provides more dramatic conflicts in comedies. Because of our differences in life and traditions, it is necessary for us to learn in order to understand one another, and this learning process enriches our lives.

AS: After working with such distinguished directors as Ang and Jiang, are you itching to direct again in the near future?

JC: To tell the truth, when I was acting for Jiang and Ang, I was having sweet dreams of being a director myself! It has been a while since I last directed and I'm sure I'm itching for the director's chair inside. But I have to find a story that I could be as passionate about as *Xiu Xiu*, a subject matter that could compel me to willingly make sacrifices all the way just to get it made. I have been looking and came across a few scripts, but they were not good enough. I'm sure there are opportunities out there for me as a hired director but the search may be lengthy and tough. I'm not the same person I was when I was in my thirties and I don't have the urge to prove myself. Apart from acting, I also have an understanding and knowledge of the entire process of filmmaking. I only do things that I believe in, therefore I have to find a really meaningful script before I commit. Otherwise I can always direct in my dreams, right? I do believe that participating in other people's shoots will help me to improve my directing potential. When I'm ready to roll, it'll be like dynamite.

AS: You were one of the earliest actors who chose to stay after you came to North America to study. The Chinese officials were very sensitive about celebrities like you embracing the Western way of life. This was not an easy decision as I understand that there was a lot of pressure on your parents who were still in China. The political environment then was very different from the open policy that China is adopting now. From then on, you demonstrated that you have continuously made intelligent personal and career choices in your life. How did you face your challenges?

JC: I was twenty years old and very naïve when I came to the US. Although my family had endured the Cultural Revolution when I was young, my life in China as a kid was pretty simple and sheltered. I had never made difficult choices. I started working when I was fourteen so I was provided with food and shelter, but not money. That made it most difficult for me to adjust after I arrived



Joan Chen and Richard Gere on the set of *Autumn in New York* (2000)

in the States as I was not equipped with the concept of money. As an idealistic socialist youth, I was suddenly exposed to a lot of choices, both materialistic and ideological. This unexpected freedom entailed endless decision making. You mentioned that I have made intelligent choices in life. I'm sorry to have to correct you, but I have made numerous wrong decisions, and was very frustrated at various stages of my life. Now, I take this period as a blessing, as I think that these experiences are necessary for personal growth. If one's life is always smooth, then a person might end up like an idiot. If I hadn't made those mistakes, I wouldn't

be experienced enough to tackle my problems in a mature manner today.

Career-wise, I didn't choose to become an actor or to be an overnight success. These things just happened in a career that I stumbled upon. Sometimes I wonder what it would be like if those were my goals and I had struggled very hard to achieve them. I wasn't planning on carrying on with my acting career after I landed here, as my purpose really was to receive an American education. I found out soon after my arrival that there existed a couple of acting opportunities worth pursuing. Things

just fell into place like they did in China, and I landed the parts. This was when I felt that people started to misjudge me. There were only a handful of mainland Chinese in America at the time, but they all seemed to have misunderstood me. Chinese from Hong Kong or Taiwan were brought up very differently and they couldn't comprehend my frustration. I began to wonder why I was so different from everybody else.

Growing up, we were taught only about ideologies and we were unskilled to battle with various real life challenges, unlike youth nowadays, who are smarter than my generation. They have been exposed to the material world at a much younger age and they are well taught by their parents and society. My lessons on survival didn't start until I was twenty and lasted into my thirties. Until I got the hang of it, it was like running a series of experiments on my own life. There was absolutely no one there to educate me as to how I should manage my private life. I got married when I was twenty-three and divorced at twenty-seven. That was a big blow for me, as I felt totally alone in a foreign country. My parents, who had always been there to encourage me, were thousands of miles away. What I had learned in China which had shaped my beliefs was illogical and useless in America. The disintegration of the values of an idealistic youth is like a death sentence on his or her spirit. I was on the brink of collapsing as my spiritual world fell apart. It took me about ten years to renew and re-build my life.

I believe that one of the forces that saved me is my love for films. Every time I was auditioning, watching or shooting a film, it felt like I had received a shot in the arm and I got a boost in my spirit. Although the part might not be a challenging one, the creative process of filmmaking showers a healing effect on me. I'm not alone as the whole crew is with me when we are in production. Although I have never pursued film as a trophy, I mean, I have never set a goal to become a star or get an important award, when I look back, I discover that I genuinely love film. The redemptive quality of love's purity and passion lifts my spirit. If films had not been around for me in times of trouble, I could not have stayed afloat.

AS: How do you choose between being a successful filmmaker and a mother?

JC: This is indeed the most difficult choice for me! Being a director demands your undivided attention and total commitment; you feel as if you have to sever your family ties until the production is over. I'm lucky that I am able to work even though I have a family, but it is difficult for me to be working away from San Francisco. It truly is a personal sacrifice, as I feel so guilty leaving my children for any length of time. Producers have lots of choices for their personnel but a child has only one mother. It seems that kids can tolerate fathers being away more than mothers, which imposes added pressure for women directors if not for the whole generation of career-women. If the situation allows, I would bring my kids with me to work, like when I was shooting *Sunflower* (*Xiang Ri Kui*, 2005) in China. Although I can sometimes take them with me when school is out, it is harder for me to concentrate, as their presence distracts me easily. Unless the shoot is in San Francisco, it is equally challenging be it in China or in L.A.

AS: Do you think that mothers in the US and in China have

different challenges? How do you rate yourself as a working mother?

JC: I think every mother in the world wants to do even better. When I was in Shanghai, I saw mothers of more affluent families spending very little time with their kids. They were usually in boarding schools for four days a week or they were put under the care of a nanny. Their own mothers didn't have much time to attend to their needs. It seems that in less affluent families, mothers play a more active role in raising their own kids.

It is a real contrast to see the mothers of my kids' classmates here in the States. I noticed that after 9-11, Americans became very pro-life and it looks like a mini-baby boom is occurring. Some families I know have four children and they don't even have a full time nanny. Some of these mothers were working before, but they decided to give up their career after giving birth, while some others are still working but they are still the primary caregiver of their kids. It looks like a reversal of Eastern and Western family practices. For me, I never think that what I'm doing is enough and if I'm not working out of town, I will spend as much time as I can with my children.

A friend once asked me if it was really necessary to put my kids in a private school, since some public schools are quite prestigious as well. I think it is really up to the kid. If he or she will study hard regardless of the learning environment, then it doesn't matter. However, if I can give my children a head start; I will, provided that I can afford it. Educating and equipping a child to face the challenges of the real world, turning them into valuable individuals for society, is the most difficult task, and this mission starts with the parents. I have made a lot of protective decisions for my daughters and I think that it is of utmost importance. I often picture them growing up, encountering heartbreaking traumas and losing their innocence. I feel sad visualizing them becoming practical and worldly; but I would never prevent them from experiencing negative emotions. They have to go through this tough journey themselves to learn how to survive as an adult.

Children often watch their mothers to decipher the world. It is not about what a mother teaches them verbally, it is the mother herself practicing her beliefs as a living, teaching tool. How a mother relates to her husband will influence how her daughter will relate to hers in the future. How children relate to their mothers and how their mothers relate to other people and the community will leave everlasting images in their early memories. All these moments will weave together to educate them about right and wrong, justice, sympathy and ultimately, humanity.

By now you must understand how difficult it is for me to work as a director. It would easily take me away from my family for a year. I'm hoping to store up positive emotions of me in my children's mind with every minute that I spend with them, so that when I really have to be away, they will have enough fond feelings of their mother to keep them going until I come home. It is much more difficult for a woman to manage both her career and her family successfully than it is for a man.

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Notes on a Radical Tradition

SUBVERSIVE IDEOLOGICAL APPLICATIONS IN THE HAMMER HORROR FILMS

BRIAN WILSON

The "Golden Age" of British cinema, which lasted from approximately 1945 to 1975, witnessed the evolution of a radical and subversive cinema focused upon challenging the moral codes and conservative values of the British establishment. This was an era characterized by shifts in cinematic culture signaling the demise of the Gainsborough melodramas and the disbandment of the Archers as exemplified by the controversial Michael Powell solo vehicle *Peeping Tom* (1960). The emergence of Hammer studios as a major force in British cinema during the early 1950s marked a direct reaction to postwar optimism and the subsequent rise of a conservative political system. It also represented alternative artistic strategies operating in opposition to the realist tendencies of classical British cinema. Although Hammer still sustains a reductive reputation often relegating it to cult status, Peter Hutchings argues "that these films do draw upon, represent and are always locatable in relation to much broader shifts and tendencies in British social history."¹ Hammer's revitalization of the British Gothic horror tradition marked a necessary shift in national cultural identity, effectively enabling ideological opposition. Within this context I shall examine Hammer in terms of its function as a cinematic phenomenon reflecting relevant generic, cultural, and sociopolitical trends.

The films produced by Hammer studios during its heyday from the early 1950s to the mid 1970s worked to engender progressive forms of ideological awareness through the utilization of traditional generic cinematic structures as a method through which to reflect and subvert a conservative value system. During much of this period Britain existed under conservative rule apart from brief moments of opposition from the Labor Party. Despite a slogan promising to "Set the People Free," Winston Churchill's victory in the 1951 General Election signaled thirteen consecutive years of conservative power in which individual freedom became actively restrained by a monolithic political system. Aside from censorship restrictions imposed by the British Board of Film Censors, the passing of the Children and Young Persons (Harmful Publications)



Poster for Terence Fisher's *The Mummy* (1959)

Act of 1955 effectively limited the importation and dissemination of American horror comic books.² Through its series of visceral cinematic models emphasizing graphic violence and sexual liberation, Hammer challenged the dominant moral codes and proper standards of good taste imposed by the establishment. In its attempts to subvert these structures, it also engendered progressive ideological forms challenging censorship restrictions and the rigid patterns of traditional British cinema.

Although Hammer existed as a company in some form or another since 1935 and managed the production of such intriguing but timely early works as *The Public Life of Henry the Ninth* (Bernard Mainwaring, 1935) and *Phantom Ship* (Denison Clift, 1935), it was not until *The Quatermass Xperiment* (Val Guest, 1955) that the studio began to assume the collective identity it would maintain for the next two decades. Hammer had already begun to explore the science-fiction genre with such films as *Rocketship X-M* (Kurt Neumann, 1950) and *Cat-Women of the*

Moon (Roy Hamilton, 1953), but *The Quatermass Xperiment* marked its foray into innovative creative areas utilizing a traditional generic structure to challenge status quo ideological patterns. Based upon the six-part BBC television series scripted by Nigel Kneale, the film exploited certain cultural fears of Cold War-era Britain. On the surface, *The Quatermass Xperiment* resembled other sci-fi vehicles of the period from both America and Britain in terms of its thematic concerns, but formally it represented a shift toward a darker stylistic tone which would appear to greater detail within many of the later Hammer horror films. It also became one of the first films to receive the X-rating since the 1951 implementation of the X Certificate by the British Board of Film Censors.³ This not only spurred increased public interest in the film, but also emphasized the studio's decision to push cinematic boundaries and subvert dominant moral codes sustained by the establishment.

Following the release of *The Quatermass Xperiment*, Hammer

attempted to capitalize upon the freedom that the X-rating allowed through the production of such sci-fi films as *X—The Unknown* (Leslie Norman, 1956). Despite its status as a minor work within the Hammer oeuvre, Howard Maxford argues that the film remains significant in that "it firmly established Hammer's transition from B-movie thrillers to out-and-out horror/science fiction."⁴ The film also signifies an era in which British cinema underwent a period of economic crisis due partly to television's rise in popularity. Peter Hutchings views *The Quatermass Xperiment*, *X—The Unknown*, and *Quatermass II* (Val Guest, 1957) as an important trilogy containing relevant allegorical threads revealing Cold War anxieties and a diminishing national identity resulting from Britain's decrease in status as a world power:

On one level, the threat from 'out there' given us in these films can be seen as a representation of this fear, a condensation within narrative forms of a changing perception of national identity, of what it actually meant to be British, especially in the area of foreign relations and world status.⁵

During this period Britain struggled with its national identity as it experienced an influx of alternative artistic and ideological patterns from America. As its youth culture became introduced to the ideals of Hollywood cinema and rock-and-roll, British cinema began to reflect the anxieties of this cultural transition through the established structures of the horror and science fiction genres.

If such generic trends resonated with a postwar British society operating under conservative rule and attempting to redefine itself after the 1956 Suez Canal crisis, it seems appropriate that Hammer's most successful series of films drew upon defining aspects of a long repressed national cultural tradition. Although the studio continued to operate within a number of different generic models, its emphasis upon the redefinition of the horror genre represented a revival of the Gothic British cultural tradition established by such important Romantic literary works as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897).⁶ The return of this tradition to postwar Britain aptly reflected Cold War anxieties and a repressed desire to subvert the moral patterns of the dominant establishment. It also foreshadowed future oppositional movements championing alternative ideologies as exemplified by radical directions in theatre by "The Angry Young Men" and culminating in punk rock.

Although aspects of the British Gothic tradition characterized by certain key works of literary Romanticism may have seemed irrelevant at the time, its resurrection with a period of turbulent social transition brought forth significant ideological features working toward the construction of a stronger national identity. Between 1957 and 1975, Hammer engaged in the construction of a series of films designed to integrate elements of this defining cultural tradition into modern British cinema. Films such as *The Curse of Frankenstein* (Terence Fisher, 1957) and *Horror of Dracula* (Terence Fisher, 1958) appeared at a pivotal time when "kitchen sink" realist tendencies pervaded both British cinema and theatre.⁷ Hammer's films during this period signify not only a reaction to the constructed realism of the dominant British cinema, but also an attempt to bridge the gap between high and low cultures. If the literary accomplishments of Shelley and Stoker had long become adapted by the academy, Hammer's films signaled

a rejection of this trend and demonstrated that such sacrosanct examples of classical literature could become successfully appropriated within the context of the cinematic horror genre.

The emergence of Hammer's Gothic horror films may also be seen as a direct reaction to censorship restrictions imposed by the British horror comics campaign. Between 1949 and 1955 this campaign effectively banned the importation of American horror comics on the grounds that "that they were full of sadistic violence, horrific obsession with death, lustful representations of women."⁸ In America, a similar campaign was underway which witnessed the extinction of graphic horror comics such as *Tales from the Crypt* and *Haunt of Fear* in the face of Fredric Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* and the Comics Code Authority. Both campaigns introduced cultural fears into an era already driven by an uninformed anti-Communist agenda, and established new moral value codes and censorship restrictions limiting what forms of entertainment the public could legally consume. Under the X-rating system Hammer held no obligations to such censorship, and its products of this period both formally and thematically represented an extension of the censored horror comics tradition.

Both *The Curse of Frankenstein* and *Horror of Dracula* visually resemble this tradition in terms of containing colorful and expressive formal structures. Like the visual style of American horror cartoonists such as Jack Davis and Jack Kamen, these films utilized antirealist patterns employing chiaroscuro lighting techniques and exaggerated character portrayals. *The Curse of Frankenstein* contains a graphic scene in which the Creature (Christopher Lee) is shot in the face after murdering an elderly man and his grandson.

Horror of Dracula ends with the Count (Christopher Lee) dying at the hands of Dr. Van Helsing (Peter Cushing), as a series of shots reveals the titular character disintegrating into ash in the face of a crucifix. Unlike the horror films to emerge from Universal Studios several decades earlier, these works indulged in excessive forms of graphic violence and gore absent from many other films of the period.

These films also continued certain traits of the horror comics tradition in terms of containing a particularly nihilistic world view reflecting aspects of the collective cultural attitude as imposed by the restrictions of the dominant conservative establishment. *The Curse of Frankenstein* features an abrupt ending in which the institutionalized Baron Frankenstein (Peter Cushing) is led to his death, as the credits sequence rolls over a silhouetted image of a guillotine. Although Frankenstein's scientific endeavors do lead to destructive consequences, his death symbolizes the defeat of those individuals willing to challenge the dominant status quo ideology. Similarly, *Horror of Dracula* portrays the Count as figure symbolizing the repressed desires of a conservative-era British culture, with Dr. Van Helsing representing "a common sense alternative designed to prevent the fantastic from totally challenging British normality."⁹

Williams points out that artistic trends in post-1956 Britain exemplified in part by the Hammer horror films pointed in progressive cultural directions, but ones "not entirely satisfactory in definitively challenging the status quo."¹⁰ However, the emergence of Hammer's Gothic horror films during this period in British history proved significant in that they did provide certain allegorical threads challenging the conservative ideological patterns imposed by the establishment. Hutchings notes that

in seeking to make horror attractive to an audience, these filmmakers necessarily had to address what they perceived to be the lived experiences, fears and anxieties of that audience, with the terms of this engagement both aesthetic and ideological. In fact that history of horror in Britain can in part be read as a number of attempted (re)identifications of an audience, the nature of which (because of demographic factors and changing definitions of youth, class and gender) was unstable.¹¹

Continuing to operate under the X-rating system, Hammer's visceral renditions of *Frankenstein* and *Dracula* marked a distinct contrast to the same films produced by Universal Studios in America during the 1930s and 1940s. They subverted the realm of high British cinema through excessive forms of violence and sexuality absent from many other films of the period. They also presented a particularly nihilistic social viewpoint in which the protagonist often did not win, but continued to exist under an oppressive antagonistic rule. As Quentin Turnour observes, "the fact that the British Horror cycle might have offered a few genuinely Gothic essays on the moral badness of Man rarely appears in discourses on its value."¹² Although this "moral badness" does appear, it functions as a progressive critique of the ideological conservatism imposed by the dominant establishment.

The alternative ideological cinematic methods utilized by Hammer during this period may also be understood in terms of Bakhtin's notion of the "carnivalesque." Through this concept Bakhtin emphasized a form of "grotesque realism" which "turns conventional aesthetics on its head in order to locate a new kind of popular, convulsive, rebellious beauty, one that dares to reveal the grotesquerie of the powerful and the latent beauty of the vulgar."¹³ Hammer's revitalization and redefinition of the horror genre challenged traditional generic conventions, and introduced a new aesthetic structure which tapped into the repressed desires of British society. This structure utilized the Gothic literature tradition as a platform through which to construct alternative creative strategies emphasizing the socially taboo areas of graphic violence and sex. If the literature of Shelley and Stoker represented aspects of the British national identity during the Romantic era, Hammer's radical appropriations worked toward the construction of a contemporary national identity revealing transitions in both aesthetics and ideology. Within the context of these horror films, beauty and the grotesque were capable of intersecting.

The films produced by Hammer during this period rely heavily upon the appropriation of certain themes and concepts from both the British Gothic literary tradition as well as key horror films from Universal studios. In the late 1950s, Hammer obtained the rights to nearly all of the horror films produced by Universal over two decades earlier.¹⁴ Rather than simply engaging in a form of direct artistic appropriation, however, Hammer utilized this material in an effort to construct a more socially informed cultural cinematic heritage. *Horror of Dracula* featured Christopher Lee as a more refined and relevant version of Count Dracula, returning the character to his natural place within British culture as opposed to his depiction as the foreign "other" in the original 1931 Tod Browning version.¹⁵ This move actively demonstrated

an attack on the conservative British establishment, symbolizing that corruption and evil exist naturally within local social structures and must not be simply relegated to other cultural realms. Likewise, *The Curse of Frankenstein* positions the monster within the original context of Mary Shelley's novel rather than its more exaggerated depiction in the 1932 James Whale film. In this form the monster represents less an unwitting and unrealistic cinematic creation, and more a dehumanized product of ideological corruption and misdirected social order.

Other films from the period also revealed an urgency to restore a form of legitimate national culture within an effectively debilitating sociopolitical scenario. Works such as *The Mummy* (Terence Fisher, 1959), *The Curse of the Werewolf* (Terence Fisher, 1961), and *The Phantom of the Opera* (Terence Fisher, 1962) did formally rely on the appropriation of certain elements from the Universal tradition, but they also spoke to newer generations of British culture in opposition to the realist tendencies of dominant cinema. Like the earlier films, these works revealed an increasing pessimism relevant to the conservative sociopolitical structure of Britain at the period in time. The conceptual oppositions between protagonist and antagonist within these films reflected existing cultural tensions between individual and establishment, but the works refused to provide any form of optimistic resolution intrinsic to the earlier Universal products. Instead, they invoked aspects of a corrupt social structure and disillusioned cultural scenario that could achieve change only through a radical form of ideological revolution.

Throughout the mid 1960s and early 1970s Hammer continued to produce a number of worthy films within the horror genre, but works such as *The Mummy's Shroud* (John Gilling, 1966) and *Rasputin—The Mad Monk* (Don Sharp, 1966) appeared increasingly irrelevant as the socially conscious energies which had informed those earliest examples seemed to fade into artistic repetition and capital interest. During this time Britain engaged in war against African insurgents in Kenya and remained under conservative rule despite oppositions from the Labor Party, but the subversive creativity Hammer had employed within the late 1950s now seemed mired down by a cultural disillusionment that seemed to transcend its national boundaries.

Like the Universal horror films produced several decades earlier, Hammer's films inevitably degraded into self-conscious products homogenized and co-opted by the very system they originally attempted to reject. As Roger Manvell points out, "it was astonishing to see how the middle-class 'opposition' went down like ninepins, and made a fashionable cult out of a literature of protest which was largely directed against everything they represented."¹⁶ If Hammer's intentions with films such as *The Curse of Frankenstein* and *Horror of Dracula* were to achieve more complex levels of social critique and artistic responsibility than the Universal horror films, it ultimately failed as the titular subjects of those works encouraged franchises and became the focus of a number of inferior sequels.

By 1975, the radical artistic vision of Hammer was essentially dead. Although the company continued to produce numerous works for both film and television, it had effectively lost sight of the national cultural tradition it had originally attempted to redefine. As counterculture movements flourished in both Britain and America, the films produced by Hammer during this period appeared as repetitious and uninspiring as the conservative

hegemony such movements attempted to reject. During this period Hammer also suffered critique from the growing feminist ideology. Hutchings notes that "the marginalization of both Count Dracula and Baron Frankenstein in British horror cinema of the 1970s was only one part of a much wider rejection of and casting out of those male authority figures who had been so important in earlier Hammer horrors."¹⁷ Sarah Street also observes that

the crisis of masculinity which was such a striking feature of many British films of the 1950s was also at the heart of horror. In Hammer horror narratives the professional's role is to restore order to the chaos which has resulted from a breakdown of patriarchal authority: the repressed surfaces as a nightmare vision of violence and sexuality which must be controlled.¹⁸

As radical ideological transformations began to occur from the feminist intervention, Hammer failed to adjust its artistic vision for the changing generations. If the studio's earliest works engendered ideological progressivism through the subversion of censorship codes and the moral value system implemented by the conservative government, its films during this period began to appear anachronistic.

At the opening of the twenty-first century, the Hammer horror tradition occupies a unique position within the history of British cinema. Apart from serious studies by critics such as Peter Hutchings and David Pirie, Hammer has endured representation as a cult phenomenon bearing association with low budget grade-B cinema. Although the body of work produced by the studio during its two-decade heyday reveals radical creative strategies challenging the restrictive conservative tendencies implemented by the British establishment, many studies regarding Hammer, such as those by Howard Maxford and Denis Meikle, focus largely upon aspects of production and dissemination. Despite the fact that serious scholarship has attempted to legitimize the horror genre since the 1970s, the Hammer tradition has continually been misrepresented and ultimately misinterpreted within its larger cultural context. However, this tradition remains significant through the fact that its key works functioned to eradicate the limiting ideological perspective associated with the dominant realist tradition of filmmaking, and introduced alternative creative directions indicating progressive transformations within the broader national cultural context. In many ways, the reverberations may still be felt today.

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Notes

Terence Fisher's *The Phantom of the Opera* (1962)

- 1 Peter Hutchings, *Hammer and Beyond: the British Horror Film*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993, p 1.
- 2 Martin Barker, *A Haunt of Fears: The Strange History of the British Horror Comics Campaign*, London: Pluto Press Limited, 1984, p. 5.
- 3 Howard Maxford, *Hammer, House of Horror: Behind the Screams*, Woodstock: The Overlook Press, 1996, pp. 28-29.
- 4 Maxford, p. 30.
- 5 Hutchings, p 42.
- 6 David Pirie, *A Heritage of Horror: The English Gothic Cinema 1946-1972*, London: Gordon Fraser, 1973.
- 7 Roger Manvell, *New Cinema in Britain*, New York: E.P. Dutton, 1969, p. 52.
- 8 Barker, p. 9.
- 9 Tony Williams, "Horror of Dracula", *Senses of Cinema* 34, Jan.-March, 2005.
- 10 Tony Williams, *Structures of Desire: British Cinema, 1939-1955*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000, p. 175.
- 11 Hutchings, p. 21.
- 12 Quentin Turnour, "Witchfinder General", *Senses of Cinema* 31, April-June, 2004.
- 13 Robert Stam, *Film Theory: An Introduction*, Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2000, p. 156.
- 14 Maxford, p. 70.
- 15 Tony Williams (2005).
- 16 Manvell, p. 42.
- 17 Hutchings, p. 159.
- 18 Sarah Street, *British National Cinema*



INTERVIEW

CHARLES MUDEDE

Charles Mudebe discusses *Police Beat* and *Zoo*

ALLAN MACINNIS

Charles Tonderai Mudebe was born in Rhodesia—now Zimbabwe—in 1969. He is currently the associate editor of Seattle alternative weekly *The Stranger*, where he regularly covers crime as part of his *Police Beat* column, and occasionally writes feature and film reviews. He has written two films with director Robinson Devor, *Police Beat* and *Zoo*, and has published one book on the Green River killer, *Last Seen*, with Diana George, available through the Artspeak gallery in Vancouver.

Police Beat (2005) was the first collaboration between screenwriter Charles Tonderai Mudebe, director Robinson Devor, and cinematographer Sean Kirby. Shot in lush blue hues and focusing on the greener aspects of Seattle, the film details the psychic disintegration of a conservative African immigrant, known only as Z, working as a Seattle bicycle cop; though the central action of the film is in English, it is narrated by Z in his own language, Wolof, and subtitled. The failure of Z's romantic relationship is mirrored by the various grotesque and absurd cases he investigates, the details of which were drawn from Mudebe's "Police Beat" column for Seattle's alternative newspaper, *The Stranger*.

Zoo (2007), the second collaboration between Mudebe, Devor, and Kirby, is a documentary on the notorious Enumclaw horse sex case, in which a successful Seattle engineer involved in top secret research at a secretive Boeing plant known locally as the Black Hole, was found to have died after having been anally penetrated by a horse. The film—which has been praised for its sensitivity and unexpected lyricism—is largely assembled around the audio testimony of other zoophiles, one of whom, known in the film as the Happy Horseman, delivered Mr. Hands to the hospital and was later charged wtih trespassing (since no laws against horse sex were in place in Washington State at that time). Another of the zoophiles, known by the name Coyote—reflecting his interest in dogs, rather than horses—actually appears in the film, though his face is never clearly shown. Mudebe's original article on the case, "The Animal in You," can be read online on *The Stranger's* website.



Charles Mudebe

The following interview took place over the course of two phone conversations in the spring and summer of 2007.

Allan MacInnis: I'd wanted to ask you about *Police Beat*, to start off with. Do I assume your intention was to invert the usual depiction of Africa as a "heart of darkness," by viewing disorder in western society from the perspective of a conservative African?

Charles Mudebe: Right, right. You're correct.

A: Was it primarily drawn from autobiographical observations of life in Seattle, or were you intending it as more of a provocation?

C: No no no—like, a lot of people think, when you see *National Geographic* or something of that kind, you always think that Africans are just these kind of sensual animals, you know? Who are immediate, who respond to things with no sense of the past but only of the present. What I wanted to show is that actually my experience, as an African, of Africans, is that they're very conservative. They actually think Europeans are kind of wild and crazy and have no regard of tradition, of history, of customs. And in that sense, you have this guy who comes into this country, and he's looking around him, and he really is trying to adjust to a new and more flexible kind of moral reality. Flexible in the sense that it seems to him that people aren't centered, that they are in a situation of invention... and it's difficult for him to act, because nobody understands that problems or situations require a kind of consensual morality, you know, a kind of consensual understanding of what the past is and therefore what the future should be. It wasn't so much that I agreed with him on his moral positions, but I wanted to understand that, as an African, that I think Africans are more moral, more conservative than Europeans are.

A: You would not describe yourself as being conservative, then.

C: No, not by any measure. I'm pretty much out there on the left, yeah.

A: In terms of Z's alienation... he seems quite isolated from the people around him. Did you yourself experience considerable alienation when coming to Seattle for the first time?

C: No, this is the funny thing, it's the very opposite of me. You know, people would say, as artists or something of that kind—as a filmmaker or a writer—that we draw on our experiences, which is what we do to an extent, but I actually had no problems. I came from a family that was educated in the United States of America, so I had a childhood here. And so when I live here, I

don't feel dislocated, I feel comfortable. I have memories here, the culture is not alien to me—I even consider myself to be western. Africans were often upset, when I was growing up, that I was very candid about the fact that I have African blood, I have African parents, I have an African language, and all these things, but to be honest, the moral system that I've adopted and used for most of my judgments, the bulk of my judgments, is a western value system. And I'm not saying that's... Just being aware of that is honest, rather than being dishonest, but when I wanted to create a character—because I've known Africans who are alienated and feel it difficult to adapt to situations, I used that. But the issue is for me—anything of James Baldwin being in Paris, in this sense, somewhere very far from where he should be—is that, the artist is always something of an exile, and that's where I come to meet him. When you commit yourself to writing, when you commit yourself to doing such a lonely venture—not lonely, but something that requires you to look at the world as a distance, or—to look at the world as an object, and you as a subject, that creates a sense of alienation and exile. So in the larger sense, as an artist, yes, I do sense that there is a feeling of exile, but as a person in America, I feel very much at home.

A: It seems that you have a very interesting sense of humour, in your "Police Beat" columns in *The Stranger*, you seem to be attracted to or drawn to particularly absurd situations that point out social disorder, which is certainly present in the film...

C: I am drawn to that. Here's an example, and this would maybe typify my sense of humour, which may be considered a dark sense of humour, or, uh, a *black* sense of humour (chuckles)—I'm punful today. There's a couple who are fighting. I read this in a report. The love is on the rocks, things aren't going well—they were once in love and now they're fighting all the time. And in a heated argument, the girlfriend picks up a birdcage—there's a bird in it—and throws it at her boyfriend, right? This cage goes through the air, towards the boyfriend, and the boyfriend ducks to avoid being hit by the birdcage. Now to me, the question is—was there a moment in the trajectory of the birdcage, when the bird thought it was flying?

A, C: (Laughter)

C: And that's my sense of humour, which is a very sad sense of humour—the bird thinks, "Oh, I'm flying!" and starts to flap its wings, in excitement—*finally, it can be what it is!* It doesn't know that it's in the middle of a love dispute and this cage is going to come crashing down on him. And so that's my sense of things—that's how I feel about life, at times, and happiness in general, to me—that sad little bird!

A: (Laughter continues).

C: You don't know how bad it's going to get, when you come down. That's all you're going to have is that moment in the birdcage when you're flying. That's as good as it's ever going to get, you know, so don't even knock it... don't say it's bad. Some would say that's a very pessimistic view of the world, but I'd say, you know, to be honest, that bird was happy for a moment!

A: It's the honey on the cliff.

C: Just because it was illusory, don't discredit it.

A: Going back to *Police Beat*, it seems like—I gather from reading your columns, you have a fairly large African-American community around you in Seattle. Z seems to be totally surrounded by white people. There's not much depiction of African-Americans in *Police Beat*.

C: Oh, yeah. The problem is, trying to get people to work for free!

A: (Laughs)

C: No, seriously! You don't even know how hard I tried to do that. You're telling people, you're making a film, and you're not being paid that much, and you've got to stand outside... Usually white people, because they have the money and the time on their hands, they'll do it much faster than others, who would want to get paid. It's hard to tell them that we're working on just a small budget, you know. Whenever we could, we really tried to shoot fast... In South Seattle, there's a big Asian and Mexican and black community, and we tried to capture it, but it's really hard... The question would be, "how can we get more blacks involved, how do I let a lot of my brothers know that sometimes you've got to work for nothing?"

A: Without feeling like they're being ripped off.

C: Ripped off. And they have been ripped off in their history, and they have memory of that, and so there's a great distrust, when someone comes up and says, you know, you're going to get fifty dollars to sit around in the cold because film is a slow process and we just need you nearby because we never know when we can shoot this scene... It sounds exploitative. Instantly. And I think that unless you have money to compensate for that, and promise it, you're not going to get that much black and other involvement—you know what I mean? I'm not really sure it answers the question—I'm just saying that film is inherently exploitative, particularly if it's independent film. You know, I've never been paid even a dime for *Police Beat*, not even a quarter, and I worked on it long, but I've always worked on stuff with no anticipation of money. I mean, now I'm salaried, of course, as a journalist, but for many years, I didn't work for anything. And I took care of a horse –

A: You took care of a horse?

C: Yes, I took care of a horse on a farm, and it was a good job for me to have, because it paid so well and it didn't get in the way of my work, because the horse has to only be fed twice a day, or even once, according to me... But you know, the thing is, it's hard to tell people that. It's hard to tell black youth, who are going to school—you know, they're like, "well, look, you got ripped off, you got jacked, man, that's fuckin'..." And you're saying, "Well no, I'm sorry, I didn't get paid! I started writing when

I was 25 years old and I didn't get really any serious money until I was 32! I didn't get a paycheque, and at 32 I finally got a salary of \$30,000 and I was blown away!" You say that, and they're going to be like (indicates skepticism)... Even now, when I'm finally earning a decent wage, a decent salary at 38, it's hard to say this to them, the kids, the youth, and the others of colour, of my colour—they think it just happened overnight. You know, in hip hop, there used to be this sense of paying dues, there really was; there was something to remind people of paying dues, to do it for nothin'. But that ethic is sourly missing. Well, it's not that it's sourly missing, some of us do deserve to get paid, but some of us are willing to stick it out, and I stuck it out, I have. I know one day maybe we'll make money on this, but... that was that happened with that issue, more than anything else.

A: Before we get to *Zoo*, I have one other quick question about *Police Beat*. The plant that Z's friend brings him, that he soaks in water and drinks from. What is that? I don't understand that sequence.

C: Oh yes. When everything runs out for Z, when he can't find a solution, finally, like so many Africans do, he turns to black magic. He turns to the spirit world and asks for deliverance. It's the last hope. It's usually a friend who tells you, your situation is not normal; it's being affected by powers beyond reality. So...

A: And he's taking that because of his problems with his girlfriend or his feeling of alienation in Seattle?

C: His feeling that all of it has collapsed on him. He doesn't have a girlfriend, he's in a strange country, he's alone—what brought this on him?

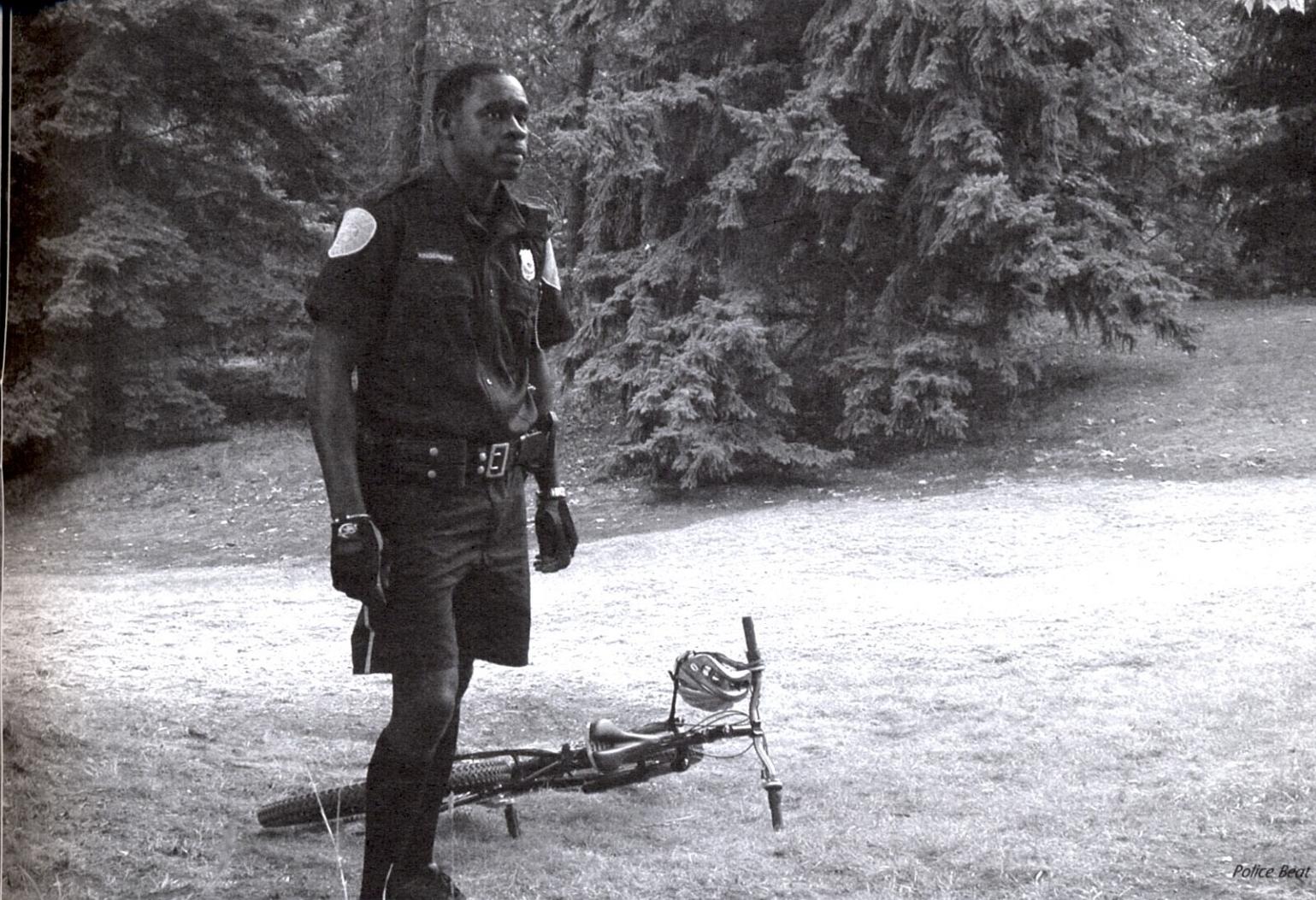
A: What's the plant called?

C: There's no plant. It's based on one that my cousin told me about. In fact, Z is based on a cousin of mine, whose name was James. He was a police officer in Zimbabwe, and he was in the habit of telling me crime stories all the time and so I got the tone of the character through his accounts of his own police work, and he would tell me about different things like using magic and things like that.

A: Okay. Let's move onto *Zoo*... Now, most of the interviews I've seen so far on *Zoo* and on *Police Beat* have focused on Robinson Devor, but I'm more familiar with your work, and your sensibility seems to suffuse both these films. Given that *Zoo* is a documentary, what were you writing? To what extent were you involved in an authorial way—what was the division of labour, exactly?

C: Well, Rob is definitely the director, but when it comes to developing the film, I'm very much involved. I'm involved in the film in every way except in the filming itself. The way the system works, it's much more used to the idea that there's just one person, but there are several people at work in the film... but the concept, the whole film was treated and designed by myself and Rob. We designed it, and then he shot it and then we went back with the editor to make sure it came out the way we designed it. That's the best way to describe the way that we worked.

A: "The Animal in You," the article you wrote for *The Stranger*, did that pre-date the idea for the film? Did you



Police Beat

C: write about it as a crime case before you considered getting involved in making a film about it?

C: It was around the same time. I remember that everyone was convinced that I would scare away people, because we were looking for people to interview for the film, and I said, you know, it's only if you write about stuff and put it out there that people will contact you. And sure enough, right after that article, they started calling me—or emailing me—with problems they had with the article, or things they wanted to address, and then, from that point on, we built a relationship with the zoo people.

A: There was quite a bit of black humour in the article. Was that something that offended zoophiles?

C: They thought I was one of the more sympathetic people in the press.

A: Oh really! (laughter).

C: Because I mean, I didn't really care for what they did, but I was interested in the fact that there was a law created to deal with something that, for some reason, the public had ignored for years and years. And it exposed to me how laws and values are sort of invented—it's sort of like, we're appalled, but laws are not natural; they're events that have dates and times and are not eternal. We don't disagree with bestiality, we *agree* to disagree with it. That's sort of what I wanted to show...

A: You actually conducted interviews with these men, then.

C: Actually, Rob did, because I had kind of a bad reputation for being kind of the cynical one of the two. I wasn't as sympathetic. It's not so much as that, though... As someone who would laugh at himself and the things that I do and I believe, the fact that I would dish that same kind of criticism to others, or that same kind of attitude to others, when they're in a situation that they feel as sensitive as loving horses, they will not find me...

A: Amenable, welcome.

C: Yeah. That's right.

A: Well, I mean, it's hard to imagine that someone could find themselves engaged in having sex with a horse and not be laughing at themselves on some level.

C: Well, yeah! In fact, you should be laughing if you're engaged in sex with a woman! That's what I mean, exactly precisely that whole thing. I would laugh at it, you know! "Oh, she sucked my dick! She put her tongue around my cock! That's bizarre and hilarious!" I mean, of all the things you could put on your tongue! And yet, if you have that kind of attitude with someone who is having sex with a horse, they're going to be a little sensitive. You're laughing at something that *should* be laughed at, but...

A: I understand. Let me ask: the film moves in an oddly spiral structure—we continually approach the central incident, then circle out again, in a very seductive way.

C: Yeah, you're right. You'll find the solution, the answer, where we state what we're doing, that is the scene when we get to the footage. We actually wrote it that the shot has to be: we're going to shoot *around* the television, because that's going to be so symbolic of the structure of the script. When you see that scene where the couple, the ranchers are watching the footage—in real life, the police did force them to see it, to identify the horse. That was actually not something the guys told us, that's something we got from the police reports. And so we—it was written—put tracks and shot in a circle around the television. And essentially, why that is—you say, why are you circling, why are you not getting to the point—well, you know, you could imagine any film with sex or some act, and you want to get to it, as if there's a solution there; as if the solution is at the center, right? Now my answer, it's not that we're avoiding it, but the answer is *in* the circling, it's not in the center. The answer is in the movement around the subject. So if you get to the subject, what does it tell you? It tells you *a man's getting banged*.

A: (laughs).

C: By a horse... I mean, if you show someone having sex, that's exactly what it is. It's someone having sex, and there's nothing much more to it—except they're having it in this position, or whatever. But you don't know about the drinks at night, you don't know about the conversations, y'know? There's so much that leads to the sexual act itself... In porn films, they try to build, all the time—I mean, now they don't, but in the past, the idea was to build a story around the sex act, because that made the sex act understandable, whereas the direct sex act itself doesn't do anything, doesn't tell you anything. They show you, well, how did this guy and this girl meet—or how did this horse and person meet. And so we thought that we always wanted to orbit the subject, because that's where we wanted to be, in the orbit of it.

A: It does a great job of manipulating the audience, because we want to get to that point, and we're continually denied.
C: We actually saw—Rob saw, not me; Rob actually saw, they showed him, they gave us—a lot of that hardcore footage, and even *they* want to get to that point right away, in a certain bizarre way. They had an issue, they had a cause: what they were going to prove was, *the horses wanna do it*. It was very important to them to let the world know that they're not drugging the horses, they're not coercing them, manipulating them—I'm trying to think of that line that Jenny (an animal rescuer called in to remove horses from the property) says in the film: they're not *working* the horses. That's what they don't want you to think: "What do you mean, *work a horse?*" That's what everybody wants to know: how do you *work* a horse to do this? And what they're saying is, no, we don't. What you do is put your ass out in the air, and the horse will come and do it by itself, and that's their essential argument.

A: (Quoting from the film): "You're gonna get bred."

C: You're gonna get bred. Yeah. That's what they say. Why is it wrong, if the horse—and you know, Rush Limbaugh says (in a voice-over heard in the film) that that's true, that's actually, absolutely true, and so they have this bizarre ally in Rush Limbaugh.

A: Right.

C: And so... all that tells me a lot more than if you go to the sex act, so—we're not that interested. We're interested in the mechanism—the technology that made the gathering possible, the internet, and the desires—what we think are the "gathering issues," not the act itself.

A: The videotape that the camera circles, in that scene, is that actually footage of, um, Big Dick and Mr. Hands?

C: No, it's not. We gotta clear it up about those guys. That happened awhile ago. I think it was—if I remember correctly—they said it was his first encounter with a horse. The footage where his death was caused does not really exist; we were able to determine that. There's tons of stuff, and it could have happened anytime they were photographing him, but we got the impression from the interviews that he'd gone there on his own that night, and nobody had really filmed him. But he *had* visited the barn, and he could do that any time, and he might have got hurt while trying to do something by himself. And in fact, H. says as much.

A: Uh-huh.

C: H. is pretty reliable. I always felt that H. almost never lied about what happened. Happy Horseman was ideological—so it wasn't that he lied, but he would always want the story to fit his ideology.

A: Which was –

C: Which was that horsefucking was the greatest thing that ever happened to man. Basically, yeah.

A: He's the guy who says it's a very "intense, wonderful kind of feeling," that there's no pain...

C: Yeah. He's the ideologue of the group.

A: He seems the most articulate of them.

C: The most articulate of them—the one who ended up at the courthouse, as well. But definitely, he's the person who has this ambition that it could be liberated and incorporated into the mainstream. The others are not so... Like, if you look at H., he's more interested in just his farm, his farm life. If you look at Coyote, he's a pragmatic kinda guy. He's like—it's not gonna happen. But if you listen to the other one, he was like, it could and it will happen.

A: That we can liberate horse sex.

C: All kinds of sex.

A: There's a subtle class thing going on, where Mr. Hands (the aerospace engineer who died as a result of sex with the horse) obviously doesn't fit in...

C: That's there, that's definitely there, and I'm glad that came out, because that's definitely in the interviews. There *was* a class element. I mean, a lot of the guys—if you're a ranch hand (H.) or a truck driver (the Happy Horseman) or if you come from rural Virginia (Coyote), you're not in the same class as a guy who is writing code for Boeing. You're not. And he is, he's writing code, not just for Boeing, but for Boeing's secret military interests. So he's a genius. Nobody wakes up today and starts to cipher and

work through mathematical codes of that sophistication, at that level... We're talking about the leading airplane corporation in the world, and he was a member, an engineer—not just a low one, but a distinguished engineer, for that corporation. So, definitely, he had other issues... And quietly I will say, I always felt this... In that break between him and the others, one could see, because of his technological and intellectual headiness, and the fact that he was a mathematician, a man of the mind—which he is; there's no other way you can sort out radar code without having a serious mathematical background—the fact that he was a man of the mind *may have resulted in his weakness of body!* You know what I mean, you can almost see, there's that accusation, particularly coming from Happy Horseman, that he couldn't take it, that he was not earthy enough, he was not man enough, he was too much in the head.

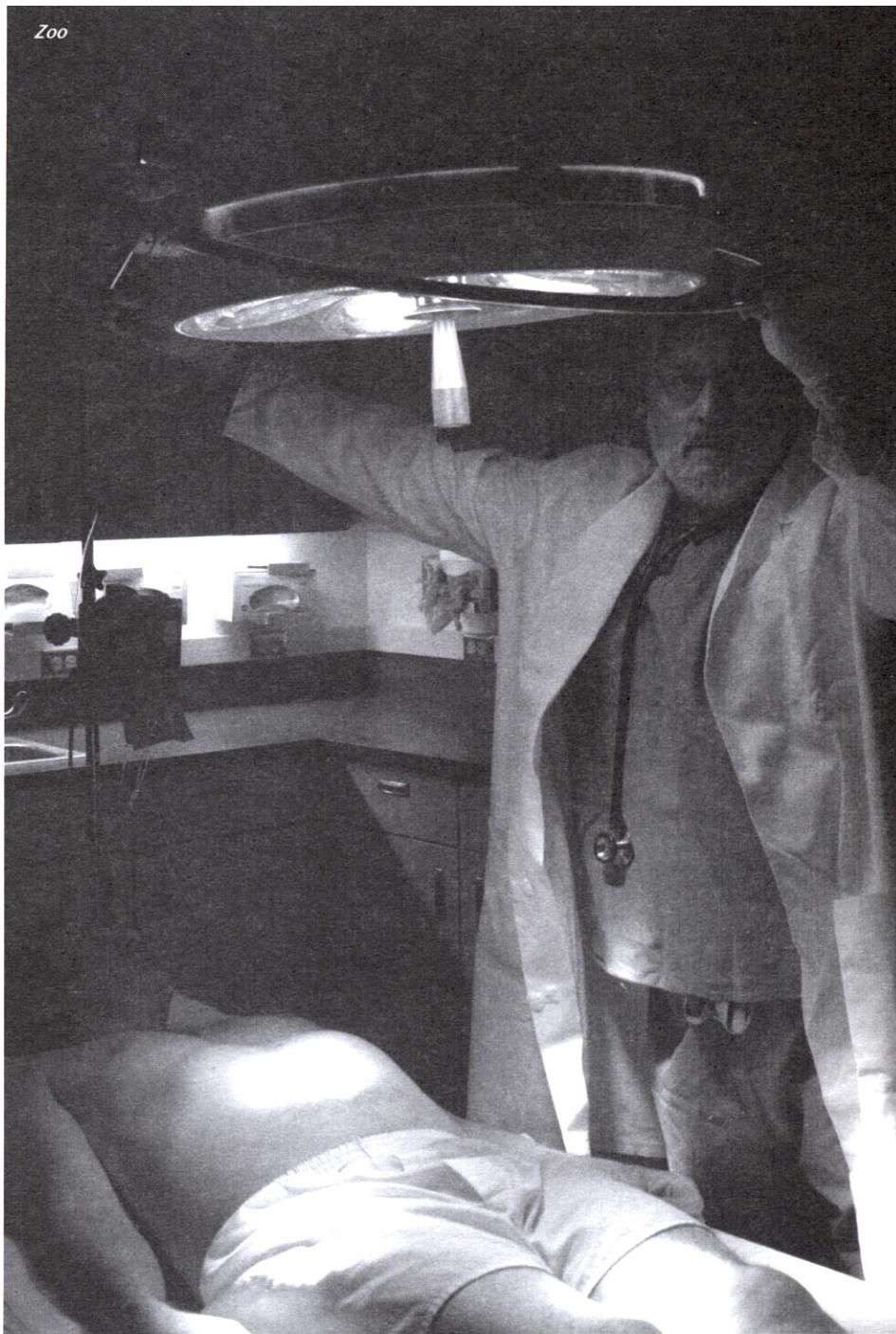
A: That he's trying to escape from his own cerebral nature—**C:** And it failed. It's something we didn't get into in depth because there wasn't enough material, but we did try to hint at that definite sense that it was not classless entirely (as the zoophiles assert in the narration). There were class issues here, and Mr. Hands was a person who was in his head, for the most part. And as for what he was trying to do with his body and the horses, he was trying to find a way to make the body come alive, in a way that he felt it hadn't done in his work.

A: In terms of the central scene where he's naked in the field, babbling mathematics and talking to the horses about how he can't go on—which is nicely prefigured by him listening to Chalmers Johnson talking about war profiteering on the radio—what is the film saying about his role in, or his feelings about, the Iraq war? Was that something you were trying to tie in for your own reasons?

C: Well, you know what, it actually came from the interviews. A lot of the guys—the three principles, H, Coyote, and Happy Horsemen, all said this. He had real difficulty with his job and what he felt was his job's connection with American imperialism and the war in Iraq. Everything you see—it's not made up, but we actually had that footage, but instead of using what they said, we just went ahead and recreated it.

A: It's been suggested that Mr. Hands refused to go to the hospital for several hours after he knew he was injured.

C: Yeah, that's so murky. Of all the research we've done, that last night—we talked to the people and so forth and so on, and we got a sense of what might have happened, but you know, yeah, he was a person who was sort of messed up. He was definitely



going through personal... you would say he was embarrassed to go to the hospital because he had had sex with a horse, but there was also the issue that he worked for Boeing, and as someone who works for a secret arm of the airplane giant, he would have been worried...

A: Well, I mean, yeah; lots of people won't come out if they're gay... coming out if you're a zoo...

C: Yes.

A: Okay, so... it's a very subversive and unsettling film, but I'm wondering to what end it's unsettling us. You're not on the side of the Happy Horseman, you're not even as sympathetic to the zoophiles as Robinson is, based on his Cinema Scope interview. Yet the film is still seducing us, leading us toward this moment. If accepting what they're doing isn't the point,

what, then, for you, is the point of Zoo?

C: What I want to say is, the values that you stand on are invented values. And the minute you start to think these other values are wrong and you don't test them, you don't think about them, and test your own values against them, then I think your values are weak, because they stand as truth and not as what they actually are—which is invented values. So we have to see them as inventors of values, and ourselves as standing on invented values. What we're asking is, not that my value is an absolute, but—the question is, this value, is it as good as my value, at the end of the day? And does it have enough support to stand? I'm not questioning them as being absolutely *no*, and I'm not saying mine is absolutely *yes*, I'm just showing—what I have to do is create a ground where values can be shifted and changed. And that to me is a better ground on which to stand in terms of our relationship to other people, as opposed to believing that there's God and there's truth and eternity.

A: Did you find yourself growing more sympathetic toward the zoos, through the process of working on the film?

C: No, I found myself knowing why I disagreed with them. Some people will watch the film and say to themselves that we're being sympathetic, but for me, I wanted to make a way to say "Okay, this is why I disagree with them," and it's not because of something invented in my head, that popped up out of my upbringing, out of my customs, which are easily accessible and usable. It was something to say, "well, I actually listened to them," you know. "I heard what they had to say about this, and let me tell you, this is why I can't agree with this, it's because *this didn't add up...*"

A: Why don't you agree with them?

C: The future may change, and I'm not saying this is a stable position, because nothing is stable in culture at all—culture is continuously modified—but if I was to say why I had a problem with it, it was because I couldn't really think of how we, as humans, had sat down to really *think* about our relationships with animals, in a way that would adequately fit sexuality into a normal—uh—in a way that would regulate animal sexuality. We've regulated eating animals, but no one has told me how we regulate having sex with something we eat. We haven't addressed some of the deeper to me, existential problems of it. You know what, to be honest, I'd say no one has resolved the key difficulties—uh—

A: Consensuality, or...?

C: No, no! I don't mean that racket. The issue is this. You can extend rights to gays, we have gay rights issues—but gay rights issues are not a big problem for me, because they're human, and I don't eat them. Eating is another moral issue we have to face up to, how we consume the world—and we enter a fantastically new territory of value-making, of actual value-creation. We can say homosexuality is fine, and to me, that's absolutely agreeable, but that wasn't taxing me, in value-creation, as a heterosexual, right? That didn't really tax me, it didn't really cost me an adjustment in how I deal with the world in any fundamental way. Now if you're going to tell me about having sex with animals that I eat, or ride, or whatever—cows, horses—if you're dealing with that issue, you're asking me to change some fundamental habits

that I have. You're asking me to bring them out into question, and until those issues are addressed, as to how we as humans are going to relate with animals in the future, in a way that would allow sexuality to be regulated with animals—until that issue is dealt with, I can't agree with it.

A: I have two more quick questions. Your geographical theory, which appeared in *The Stranger*, of horse sex in Washington State, by which Enumclaw is an anus, and Mt. Rainier is a penis—

C: You've read me closely! (Giggles).

A: I've read you closely, yes I have. Did that enter into the film at all?

C: Yes, that is probably more of the film than any other part... That was a theory where I started looking at the fact that in the Northwest, we live so close to nature, and nature is terrifying, and still has a certain awesome power to it, and in a way, horse-fucking... Judging from the guys who talked to me, they're also encountering this awesome power. Pure instinct, you know what I mean? No thought, no reflection, absolute thrust! (Laughs). There's not going to be, with them (the horses), a moment of guilt and the penis goes down—"I don't know what I'm doing!" and self-thought... There's this absolute animality! And the mountain is absolute nature, destructive and creative at once, and that's what I was sort of hinting at in the article, and a little bit of that is in the film, yeah.

A: But you don't call Enumclaw an anus in the film?

C: No, no I don't.

A: I thought you would back off on that. Uh, speaking of sympathizing with the zoophiles, though, one person who clearly thinks the film wants to do that is Gary Indiana. Do you want to respond to any of what he said in his Film Comment article?

C: Just quickly... I'm glad he was forceful, and he gave us a lot of room to express his distaste of his film, but I completely—I just think he has to relook, and rethink the film, and also he must not take it so personally.

A: Final question. *The Minotaur*, the other project planned with Robinson—is that happening?

C: No, it's switched into another border-crossing between Vancouver and Seattle. (*The theme of The Minotaur*). We're mesmerized by the idea, so we've readjusted it into a comedy called *King's Garden*.

A: Thanks for having talked with me!

C: Thank you—it was a great conversation!

Allan MacInnis, born in Vancouver in 1968, is an ESL teacher by day and freelancer, music buff, and cinephile by night, usually focusing in his writing on outsiders, eccentrics, punks, and non-mainstream cultural producers. He has been published in *Punk Planet*, *Razorcake*, *Skyscraper*, *This Magazine*, and the German music magazines, *Trust* and *Ox Fanzine*. His blog can be viewed at <http://alienatedinvancouver.blogspot.com>. As of this writing, he has seen *Police Beat* seven times and *Zoo* six.



Robert De Niro/Noodles and James Woods/Max

Once Upon a Time in America

SERGIO LEONE AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF MYTH

PETER BABIAK

Leone's use of genre conventions in *Once Upon a Time in America* (1984) seems to locate his film well within the confines of the American gangster film genre. The film bombards us with a string of clichés that we readily associate with American gangster films. These clichés are evident in, but are not limited to, patterns of speech in the film ("Hold it boys, don't shoot!"), patterns of nomenclature in the film (nicknames such as "Noodles", "Patsy", "Cockeye", etc.), patterns of dress in the film (handkerchiefs worn as masks in a hold-up scene.), props appearing in the film (tommy-guns, antique cars, etc.), and patterns of action in the film (hold-ups, drive-by shootings, etc.). Because of this heavy emphasis of Leone's on compliance with genre conventions, we readily accept *Once Upon a Time in America* as an American gangster film.

When we examine Leone's use of theme in *Once Upon a Time in America*, however, we find the film quite subversive to the values of this genre. Leone is using an archetypal cultural genre in order to examine the impact of American cultural myth on American society. He does this by juxtaposing competing myth systems in American culture against their antitheses. By doing this Leone is able to examine the darker underpinnings of these easily recognizable myth systems. Leone's criticism of American culture will be examined in this paper by identifying those archetypal themes that Leone explores in his film, by relating those themes to their larger cultural context and to the genre of American gangster films and literature, and by discussing how those themes are incorporated by Leone into various elements of his films' structure.

Characterization and the "Noble Outsider"

The "Noble Outsider" is perhaps the definitive American culture hero and is the predominant cultural figure that we encounter in Leone's film. The "Noble Outsider" is an archetypal figure who exists on the fringes of respectable society, yet who also ultimately defends society's values. Examples of this

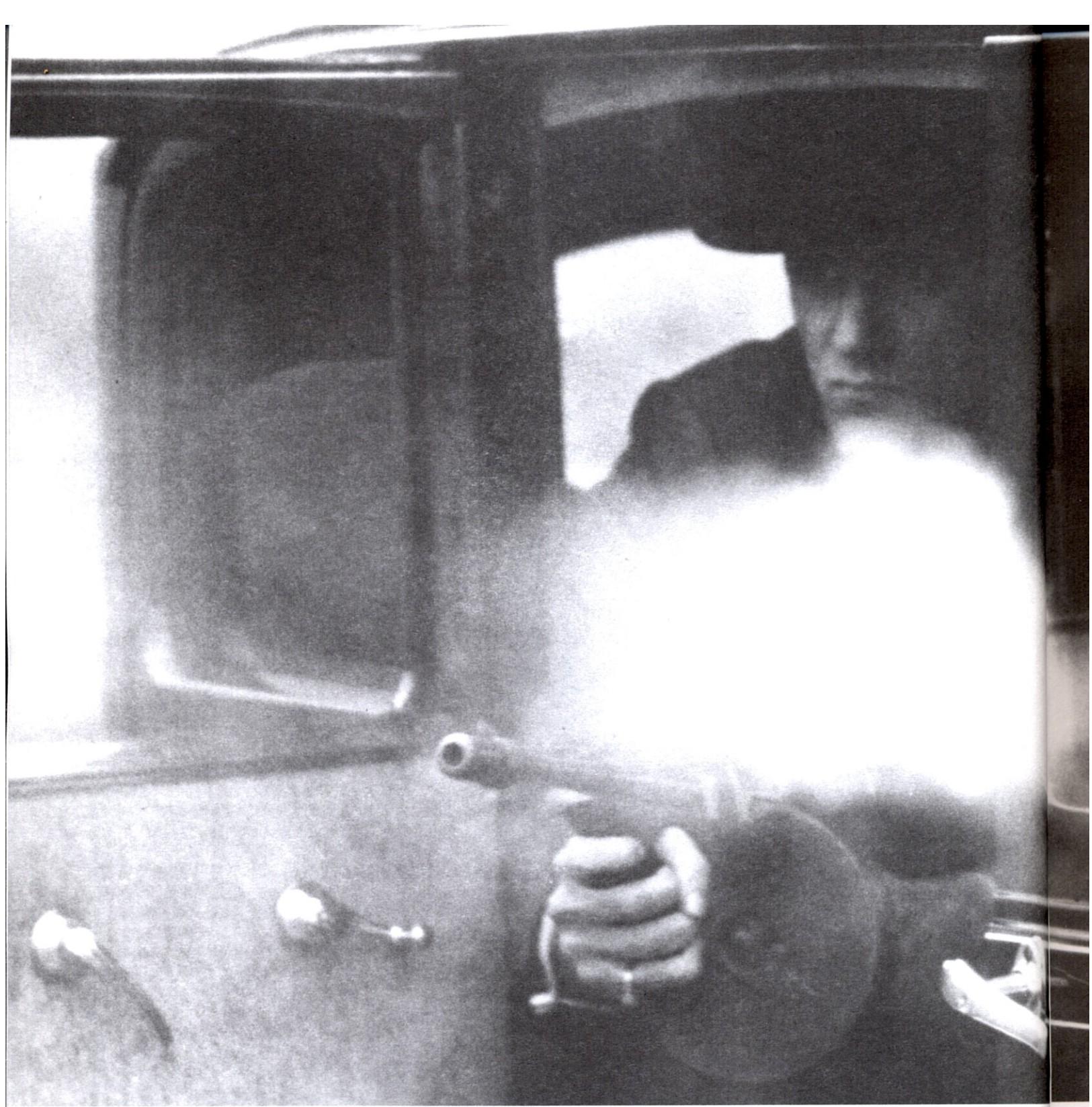
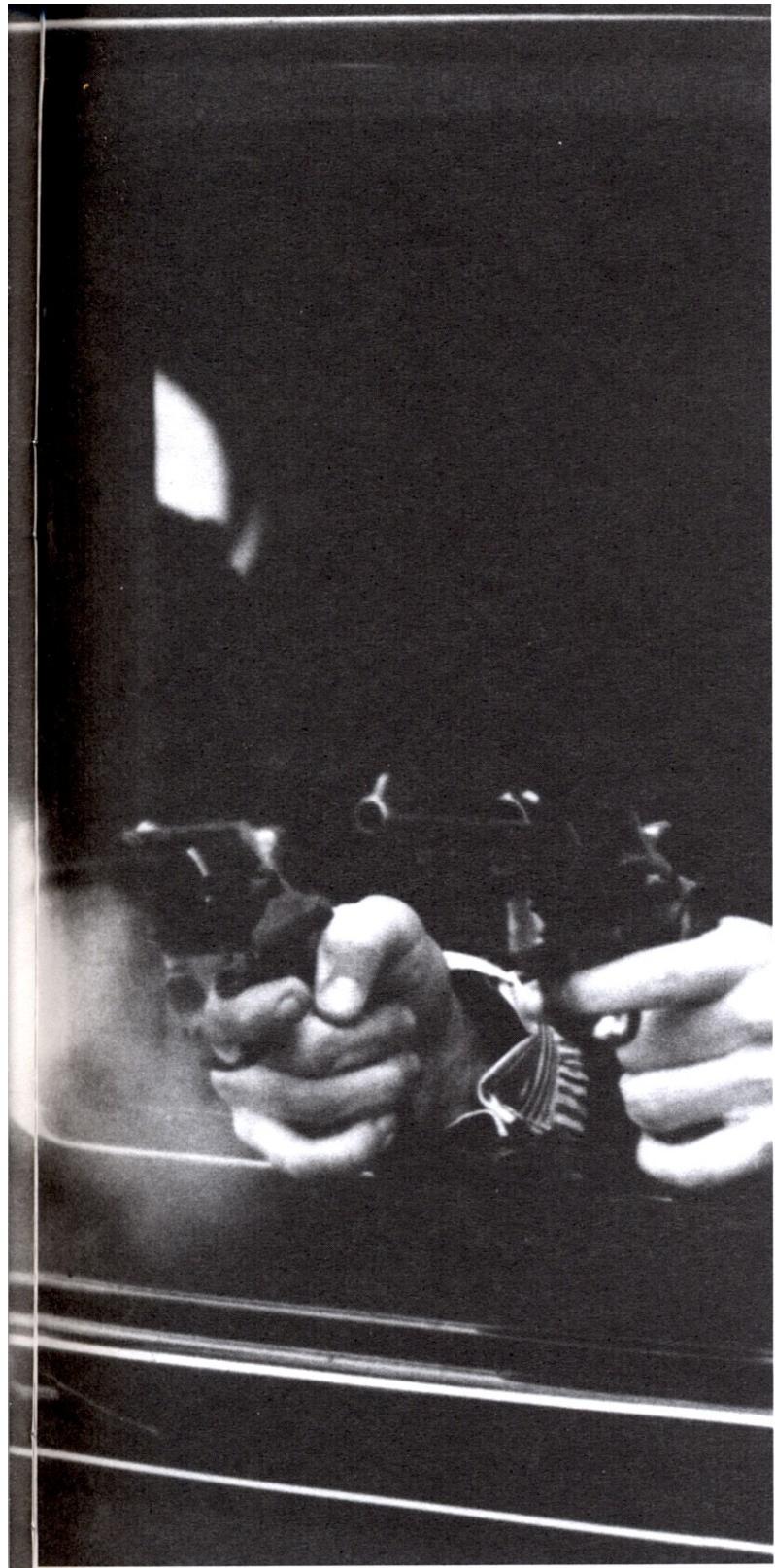


figure in American culture range from James Fenimore Cooper's *Deerslayer* /Hawkeye (1841) to *Shane* (1953) to John McClane in *Die Hard*(1988). The character of Roy Earl in Raoul Walsh's film *High Sierra* (1941) is an example of a "Noble Outsider" archetype occurring in a gangster film. Earl steals in order to cure the woman he loves of a crippling illness, shows compassion to a homeless woman, and is killed when he steps out of a cave he has hidden inside in order to greet his pet dog.

Like Roy Earl, the character of Noodles in Leone's film is pre-

sented to us very much in terms of his sentimental side. As an adolescent, he sneaks into a washroom in order to read a Victorian romance novel. As an adult he has an entire seaside restaurant, complete with orchestra, opened during the off season in order to provide the perfect evening for the girl of his dreams. The gang that Noodles is a member of very much represents a society in microcosm in this film, and Noodles is the repository of its' memory and values. The film is presented to us almost entirely from his perspective, and relates to us his memo-



ry of the history of the gang from its' inception to its dissolution. It is Noodles' fidelity to the memory of the gang that forms the crux of this film.

The association of Noodles with romanticism is logical, for the myth of the "Noble Outsider" is rooted in the medieval myth of the courtly chevalier, which in turn, is the progenitor for the myth of male prowess. The very same set of cultural assumptions that provides the basis for Noodles' "chivalrous" behaviour toward Deborah therefore also provides the cultural underpin-

nings for violence and rape. Leone is scrupulously careful in presenting the darker side of Noodles' character just as prevalently as he does Noodles' "nobler" aspects. Noodles' grief as an adolescent at the death of a friend expresses itself in the vicious murder of Bugsy and a cop. Noodles' great unrequited love as an adult for Deborah expresses itself in rape. Although these behaviours seem wildly out of step with the motives that produce them, Leone is noting that they are part and parcel of the same cultural belief system.

The antithetical myth in American culture to that of the "Noble Outsider" is that of the "Company Man" or the "Economic Acquisitor". The ideology surrounding this character suggests that he acquires wealth for himself and, as a by-product of this activity, brings prosperity to the community. Max represents this set of ideals in Leone's film. It is Max who first brings prosperity to the adolescent gang by blackmailing the cop into "keeping an eye closed" for them and by making a deal with the local Cosa Nostra. Max also organizes the gang into an effective unit, realizing the aspirations of the more intelligent but less ruthless Noodles to fruition. While Noodles is in prison, it is Max who looks after his family. By the time of Noodles' release, Max has acquired Fat Moe's delicatessen and renovated it into a speak-easy, bringing the gang to a prominent position in the cultural life of the city.

The modern company man, however, has been described as "the beast of no nation", by people who contend that the only loyalty the company man displays is to the acquisition of wealth, a contention that the examples of the Bronfmans, the Reichmanns, and Donald Trump would seem to support. As an adult Max is obsessed with the acquisition of capital and the consolidation of power within a system that distributes wealth only to those who prove themselves ruthless enough to obtain it. Sentiment and loyalty do not fit in to the capitalist equation, and Max cynically discards the brotherhood he was once sworn to protect as a useless impediment to the progress of his career.

Sexuality and the "Quest for Love"

Like the "Noble Outsider" archetype, the myth of the "Quest for Love" also permeates American culture, and also stems from the medieval courtly material. However, in American mythology, the myth of the "Quest for Love" becomes associated with the pursuit of happiness mentioned in the preamble to the constitution, causing the Quest's logical end to be perceived as a goal to be achieved rather than as a relationship to be established. Its most famous occurrence in American culture is that of Scarlett's pursuit of Ashley in *Gone With the Wind* (1936). It appears in gangster folklore in Raymond Chandler's novel *Farewell, My Lovely* (1942) as Moose Malloy's searches desperately for his lost girlfriend Velma. In *The Great Gatsby* (1925), Jay Gatsby's quest for Daisy is also related to gangster lore, although Nick so completely romanticizes his version of events that we only see Gatsby's obvious connections to the underworld twice.

Noodles' quest for Deborah takes place in a world where real love simply isn't possible. Leone extrapolates the world of the film from the larger context of American culture. In this world, we are presented with only two types of sexual activity; sexual violence and prostitution, activities which fall along the ideological lines drawn in the characterizations of Noodles and Max. As the embodiment of male prowess, Noodles prefers that women

submit to his physical force. Max, as an economic acquisitor, uses wealth as an instrument of seduction. These character traits are also in line with mythical norms in American society which suggest that there are three kinds of women, nice girls who you take home to mother, sluttish girls who deserve to be raped because they "ask for it", and gold-diggers who are really just glorified prostitutes.

The first sexual image we see in the film—that of a woman's breast being caressed by the barrel of a pistol—is violent in nature, yet the woman appears to be aroused by it. During the hold-up scene at the jewelry exchange, Carol begs Noodles to violently rape her, and is portrayed as very much enjoying his decision to do so. The development in adolescence of Noodles' attitude towards women, is very much portrayed in terms of his predilection for rape. When alone with Peggy in the washroom he forces her against a wall while grabbing her breast, and is delighted to find that she enjoys it. Noodles is a product of a set of cultural assumptions that tells him that women enjoy sexual assault, hence his rape of Deborah, the woman he "loves". He simply doesn't understand that she doesn't enjoy this, and takes her screams and terror for granted as part of "normal" lovemaking. Although the first sexual image we see in the film is violent in nature, the first completed sexual act we see is one of prostitution—reflecting the early stages of Max's developing capitalism. Max purchases sex for Noodles twice in the film, once when Noodles loses his virginity to Peggy, and once when Noodles is released from prison. This is done in concert with Max's early belief in economic prosperity as a commodity to be shared by the community. As Max increasingly assimilates the values of capitalism however, his use of prostitution changes. He later uses his status as Secretary Bailey to acquire Deborah, in essence using wealth to "hoard" Noodles' girl where he previously would have "shared the wealth". This act also implies that Deborah, who has been built up as the "nice girl" in this film, really differs from a hooker like Peggy only in price.

There are two seeming exceptions to this rule of ideological importance as a determinant of sexual orientation. Both Noodles and Max manage to form caring, adult, relationships with women early in the second act of the film. Far from suggesting that real love is a possibility in this world, however, Leone is using the portrayal of these relationships to highlight its impossibility. The relationship between Noodles and Eve is terminated when she is killed as a target of violence directed at him. The relationship between Max and Carol is terminated when he fakes his own death and arranges for her to be placed in a sanatorium. The endings of these relationships are in accordance with the character styles of these men—the consort of Noodles becomes a victim of violence whereas the consort of Max is sacrificed to his bid for economic ascendancy.

Narrative Structure and the "Lost Brotherhood"

Probably stemming from the biblical myth of the Garden of Eden, the modern myth of the "Lost Brotherhood" is elegiac in nature, focusing on a social pact made at a time of relative innocence which is later disrupted at a time of "coming of age". Also appearing in the medieval courtly material, most notably in the Arthurian saga, it is recurrent in American culture. It can be found in the James Bond film *For Your Eyes Only* (1981) as an explanation for the enmity between Christatos and Columbo,

and can also be found in *Ben-Hur* (1959) as an explanation for the enmity between Judah Ben-Hur and Messala. Its classical appearance in an American gangster film is seen in Michael Curtiz's *Angels With Dirty Faces* (1938) where two friends are chased by the police as children. One of them is caught and becomes a gangster whereas the other escapes and becomes a priest. In a final gesture of tribute to the former friendship the gangster acts like a coward when he dies in the electric chair.

The narrative focus in Leone's film is entirely upon the moment at which the social pact is disrupted. The narrative structure of the film is cyclical—the film begins and ends with the moment of the dual betrayal. Between these two presentations of the moment of social dissolution, Leone simultaneously creates two antithetical betrayal myths : the myth of the "noble betrayal" as related to us by Noodles' recollections, and the revisionist myth of Max's treachery towards the gang as it unfolds in the film's present. These antithetical myths create a tension between the "past" and "present" in the film's narrative structure that must be resolved . Noodles' memory of the past is incongruent with his experience of the present. The film's narrative attempts to restore a lost equilibrium.

Underscoring this is the imagery with which Leone accompanies the flash-backs and flash-forwards that the film is structured around. The transitions between past and present are portrayed dynamically and are evocative of the relationship between the two. The first transition occurs as the adult Noodles peers through one side of a window in the bus depot. Leone quickly cuts to a shot of the elderly Noodles looking through the other side of the same window. The second transition occurs as the elderly Noodles looks through the peep hole that he used to spy on Deborah as an adolescent. Leone cuts from a close up shot of Noodles' eyes as an elderly man, to a shot of Deborah dancing as an adolescent, to a close up shot of Noodles eyes as an adolescent watching Deborah. These types of transitions suggest that all of the actions that are portrayed as part of the film's "past" are dynamic and interrelated with those events we see in the film's "present".

The myth of the dissolution of the brotherhood as Noodles constructs it for us is elegiac, glorious, and tragic. Constructed entirely out of Noodles' memory of the past, it is the archetypal story of the bond formed in youth that in adulthood brings great joy and prosperity, until something goes horribly wrong. Noodles assumes responsibility for that "something that went horribly wrong". As he understands it, he turned the gang in to save Max's life, but everyone except Noodles was killed in a confrontation with the police. The gang's money disappeared somehow, erasing all traces of the gang's impact on the social world. This myth system leaves Noodles as the sole repository of the gang's memory. Although in turning them in Noodles has technically betrayed the existence of the brotherhood, he did so in the name of the ideal of the brotherhood, which is mythologically more important.

The antithetical myth of the dissolution of the brotherhood as revised for us by Max in the film's present is, by comparison, cruel, sordid, and meaningless. As an adolescent, Max forms a gang that will enable him to acquire considerable amounts of capital and power by the time that he is an adult. As time progresses, Max finds the gang that had previously been his greatest asset now limiting his bid for power, so he cynically has them

killed in a staged shootout with the police. Max has not only betrayed the existence of the brotherhood, he has completely violated the ideal that the brotherhood was founded upon, going so far as to manipulate Noodles into being the catalyst that will ensure the success of Max's deception. Max destroys the gang by using Noodles' belief in the sanctity of their social bond as the instrument of the destruction of that bond.

The "Vigilante" and The Final Resolution

Currently, the archetypal figure of "The Vigilante" is one of the more popular to be found in American culture, and represents a darker side of the noble outsider. The "Vigilante" is usually a shadowy figure who redresses social wrongs when social systems are unable to do so. Tim Burton's *Batman* (1989) is presented as a vigilante figure, as is James Bond in *Licence to Kill* (1989). Raoul Walsh's film *The Roaring Twenties* (1939) incorporates vigilante mythology into its narrative—the character portrayed by James Cagney agrees to take the rap for the gang believing that they will look after him when he gets out of prison. When he is released, he finds the gang has no intention of fulfilling their promise, so he avenges himself by murdering the character portrayed by Humphrey Bogart. The popularity of vigilante figures is in their appeal to the American right wing—justice is dispensed with a single shot at no expense to the taxpayers.

Our perception of Noodles changes throughout the course of Leone's film as our understanding of the events of the past is modified. Noodles is first portrayed as a potential object of vigilante justice, yet by the end of the film he has progressed to a potential instrument of vigilante justice. Yet Noodles refuses to kill Max when the opportunity presents itself. Rather than avenge the memory of the brotherhood, Noodles is attempting to reaffirm it, for Noodles bases his cultural identity in the myth system that the gang represents.

Cultural myth is of crucial importance to our lives because it is part of the process by which we establish our identities as human beings and derive meaning from our lives. Max is facing the end of his life and, as a result of his betrayal of the gang, has lost both his personal and his cultural identity. His new family name (Bercovitz has been anglicized to Bailey) and his obvious wealth (he wears a tuxedo and lives on a huge Long Island estate) now visually identify him as a member of the successful economic acquisitor class that is sanctioned by American society. He has exhausted the possibilities of capitalism only to find himself emotionally and culturally barren. Max believes that, in allowing Noodles to avenge his betrayal of the gang, he can reconnect himself to the myth system that contains his foregone identity.

As a product of capitalist ideology, however, Max believes that he can somehow buy his way back into his cultural context. He first erects a huge mausoleum as a sort of shrine to the memory of the brotherhood, and then offers Noodles, the only other surviving member of the gang, a fortune in cash in payment for Noodles' murder of Max. But a cultural identity cannot be bought, it has to be lived and believed in, something which Max has become far too cynical to do. Noodles appears here not as the vigilante that Max would like him to become but as a disciple of the memory of the gang who refuses to accept, despite the evidence to the contrary, that the integrity of the gang's memory has in any way been compromised. Noodles insists on

referring to Max as "Secretary Bailey" during this scene, although he realizes that it really is Max who he is talking to. He is making a conscious decision to remain loyal to the values of the gang, which specifically would forbid him from killing another gang member, no matter what the circumstances.

In their final conversation Noodles and Max are desperately trying to preserve the meanings of their lives. Max hopes to reconnect himself to the brotherhood by allowing Noodles to become a vigilante, whereas Noodles strives to maintain the integrity of the brotherhood's memory by refusing to acknowledge that Max has destroyed it. It is this final attempt for meaning in their lives, however, that ultimately renders both of their lives meaningless. Max is trying to reconnect himself to something which had been previously destroyed, whereas Noodles is awash in a sea of nostalgia for something that he now knows never really existed. The film ends with their mutual destruction. Although there is ambiguity as to whether Max leaps into a pulverizer or merely pulls another disappearing act into another identity, he has lost at his bid to reestablish his true sense of identity, and therefore feels his life is wasted. Noodles once again withdraws into his memory of the past, which is now coupled with his memory of a trip to the opium den. Max's reliance on capitalist mythology has led him to an ultimately empty existence, whereas Noodles' reliance on gangster mythology has proven an opiate that continues to blind him to the truth of his life.

Conclusion

Leone employs themes that are recurrent in American culture in order to subvert the value systems of that culture. Leone achieves this subversion of myth in two ways: firstly by juxtaposing competing myth systems against one another in order to invite ideological comparisons between them; and secondly by showing us the darker implications inherent in the myth systems that he presents. The myth system that Noodles represents appears absurdly idealistic in contrast with that of Max which appears at the same time as opportunistic and ruthless. The value system of Noodles is also linked to violence and rape, whereas the value system of Max is linked to the devaluing of human relationships.

Leone is portraying a cultural problem which has no easy answer. Cultural myth is an integral part of the process by which we define ourselves. If we lose our connection to myth, we lose our sense of personal identity, rendering life a meaningless sequence of events. If we maintain our connection to myth too strenuously, life becomes a series of fantasies that have no relation to the outside world. There is also the problem of the content of the cultural myth system. A society whose ideological structures give rise to violence and rape or the devaluing of human relationships surely needs to question the tenets on which those structures are based. Leone stands outside of the American cultural mainstream, and has the objectivity necessary to examine the implications of American cultural myth on American life. *Once Upon a Time in America* is a film that attempts to begin the process of questioning those tenets.

Peter E.S. Bablak is an ongoing contributor to CineAction magazine. He is currently preparing his doctoral dissertation on representations of Shakespeare in the cinema, which he finds in no way incompatible with his other published work on Clint Eastwood, Robert Mitchum, and Stanley Kubrick.

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